You call That Service?
4
Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by
Hiroki Ozaki

You call That Service

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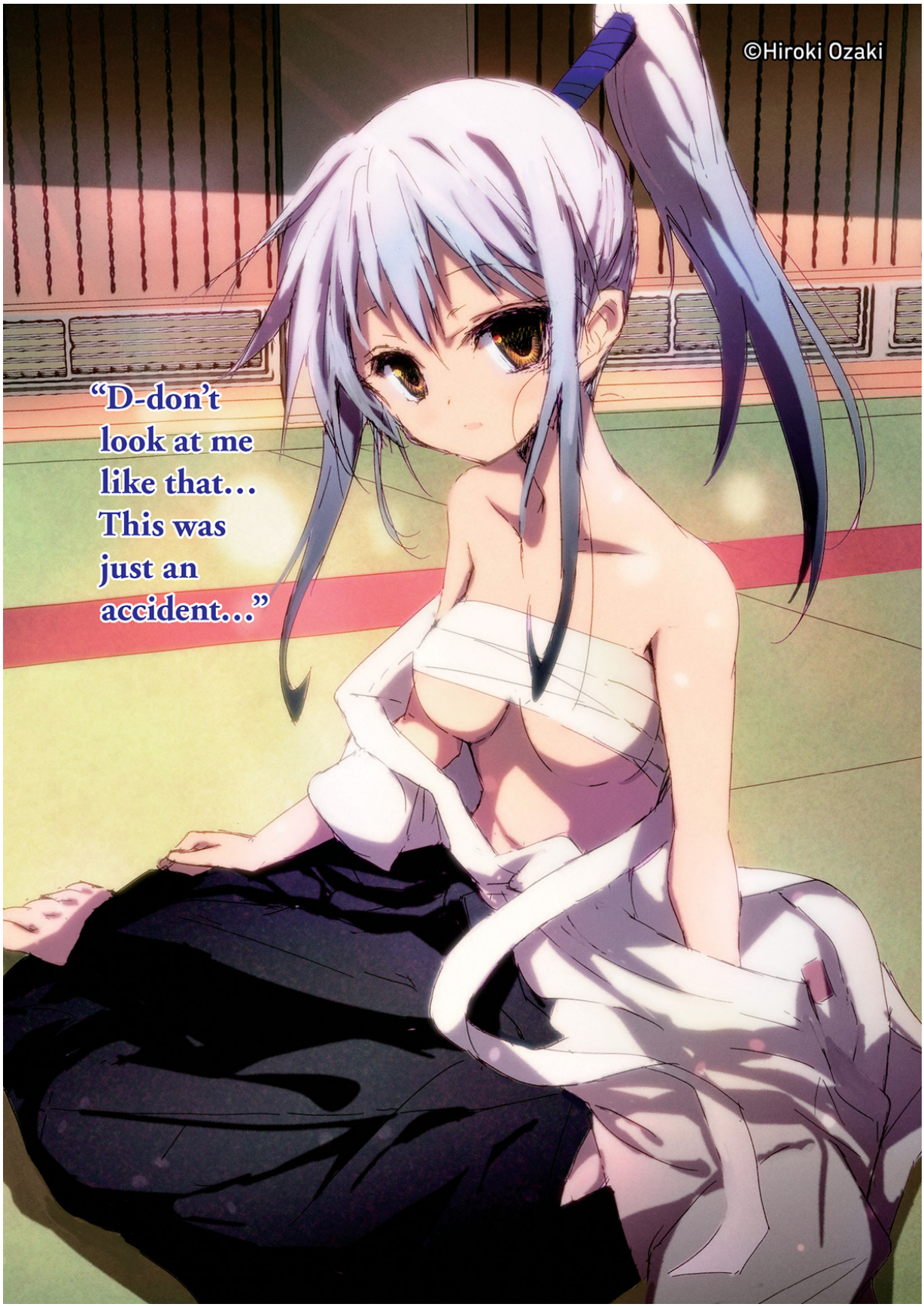
“This is a ceremonial outfit in the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood. ♥”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"D-don't look at me like that… This was just an accident…"

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Ouka Sarano

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Sasara Tatsunami

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YEN ON
New York

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You Call That Service?, Vol. 4
Kisetsu Morita

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt
Cover art by Hiroki Ozaki

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OMAE NO GOHOSHI WA SONO TEIDOKA? volume 4
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Original Japanese edition published in 2012 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2021 by Yen Press, LLC

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Yen On
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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: August 2021

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Morita, Kisetsu, author. | Ozaki, Hiroki, illustrator. | Bernhardt, Jasmine, translator.
Title: You call that service? / Kisetsu Morita ; illustration by Hiroki Ozaki ; translation by Jasmine Bernhardt ; cover art by Hiroki Ozaki.
Other titles: Omae no gohoshi wa sono teidoka?. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2019–
Identifiers: LCCN 2019036814 | ISBN 9781975305628 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975305642 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975316754 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975325046 (v. 4 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: CYAC: Vampires—Fiction. | Love—Fiction. | Humorous stories.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M6725 Yo 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019036814

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-2504-6 (paperback)
978-1-9753-2505-3 (ebook)

E3-20210804-JV-NF-ORI

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You call That Service?

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Characters

Ryouta Asagiri

A second-year high school student who wandered into the Sacred Blood Empire. He is cursed to be extremely attractive to human females. He became Shiren's minion and now lives with her.

Shiren Fuyukura

There was some distance between Shiren and her older sister, the emperor, because Shiren is the daughter of someone suspected of assassinating the previous emperor, but they recently made up. Ryouta's master.

Ouka Sarano

The current emperor, who claimed independence from Japan for the Sacred Blood Empire. Shiren's older sister. An old friend of Ryouta's from elementary school.

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PROLOGUE

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PROLOGUE

The Sacred Blood Empire—a nation founded where the Japanese city of Akinomiya once was.

This nation was an empire, so democracy had no place here. The emperor, Ouka, would raise taxes according to her whims and personal biases.

There were several noble families that served the emperor. They had been the emperor's chief retainers since before the establishment of the country, and they ruled at her (or his) right hand.

One of those families was the Tatsunami family. Many in their past had held the position of shogun.

One of the daughters in the modern age, Sasara Tatsunami, strictly adhered to her post as personal guard to the emperor. Her position was at the forefront of her mind at all times, even during meals—or so she had hoped to do.

"Sasara, you've spilled your soup!"

"Oh, dear! I have! I am sorry, Mother!"

The table was soaked. Sasara was ashamed of her blunder—she had been so absentminded that her mother had found it necessary to admonish her.

There was no school today, so she was currently having lunch with her family. But the entire time, Sasara had been spacing out like a deflated balloon. Lately, it had become a usual sight for her to stare out blankly toward the garden, holding her spoon.

"What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell?" asked her father, Maxwell Tatsunami. The foreign name was indeed his given name—most members of the Tatsunami family typically took inspiration from the western hemisphere.

"No, I don't believe so…"

"Yet you've spilled your soup seventeen times so far. I believe you are

indeed out of sorts. Maybe you should go to a doctor."

"Doctor… Playing doctor with Her Majesty the Emperor, Lady Ouka… Hnnng… Oh, Lady Ouka, please administer the lewd shot… Oooh…"

"At least you sound like the Sasara we know. Your health does not seem to be the problem."

Most would find what she'd said a bit problematic, but to the Tatsunami family, who saw vowing one's loyalty to the emperor as the fitting course of action, it was apparently the right thing to say.

"Hmm, if you're not ill, then is it a problem of the heart?"

"My heart is always filled with my love for Lady Ouka. Dripping wet with it."

Who says that to their parents?

"Then, let me guess—are you in love?" her father asked, point-blank.

"Yes. I am in love with Lady Ouka. Twenty-seven hours a day."

"…Besides Her Majesty."

"Oh… Ah… Um…" Sasara's eyes were swimming. He was right on the money. "Th-that is not the case at all…" She tried to deny it, but what she felt in her heart was different.

While she was not sure if it was love, there was currently someone Sasara simply could not get out of her head.

Ryouta Fuyukura.

Not too long ago, one of the dancing girls at the festival had stolen her heart. Sasara had been unable to tear her eyes away. They hadn't been able to talk very much after the performance, since the girl had another job to attend to, but Sasara had not been able to stop thinking about her.

Her crush had turned out to be Ryouta Fuyukura, who had been put into a girl's costume in order to round out the numbers for the dance.

Could my father be right…?

Sasara had been curious about Ryouta for a while now.

Once, the two of them had fought to the death, and Sasara had lost. Her wounds at the time had been so bad that she would not have survived under normal circumstances.

But Ryouta had commanded her to drink his blood.

Blood had super restorative effects to the Sacred Blooded, but consuming another's blood was also essentially seen as an exchange of vows.

Of course, it was not permissible for the unmarried daughter of a noble family to do such a thing.

Even if the relationship itself was accepted by her family and society, she would have no other choice but to marry him now that the deed had been done. Like a shotgun wedding.

And Sasara had kept the whole incident a total secret from her parents. How could she tell them?

But she couldn't change the past, and she could no longer ignore Ryouta. As much as she wanted to forget about it, she couldn't. She genuinely even considered just taking a boulder to the head to knock out the memory.

I feel nothing special for him… But our relationship is such that I cannot not *think about him…*

So, what had she felt when she watched the performance, when she did not know that was Ryouta?

Perhaps she did harbor feelings toward him, regardless of the blood-drinking incident.

No, that is much too silly. Why must he move my heart so? I know—it was because he was in disguise. I was simply tricked… Yes, that must be it.

"Sasara, you spilled your soup again! This is the eighteenth time!"

Once again, her mother's voice brought her back to reality.

"Goodness me, what is wrong with you? You've spilled more than you've actually eaten! Is this the trend among children nowadays? Spilling soup twenty times to get someone to like you back?!"

"Like me back?! Unthinkable! I don't even like *them*! In fact, *hate* would be a much more apt word!"

"So you did fancy someone? Well, that's not unusual for your age," her father commented, noting her reaction.

"Of course not, Father. Nothing of the sort. Three terabytes of my mind are dedicated solely to Lady Ouka. I lack the capacity to care for anyone else that way."

"Which means you are not interested in anyone else (aside from Lady Ouka)?"

"Yes, I am not interested in anyone else (aside from Lady Ouka)."

“I am relieved to hear that. We can now comfortably send you to matchmaking.”

He dropped the bombshell like it was nothing.

“M-matchmaking? Match…making? Making matches?”

“Why do you sound like we’re forcing you to switch careers? And you spilled your soup again.”

“Oh… I’m sorry, I was just a bit shaken… What exactly do you mean?”

“A formal matchmaking service. The one where a man and woman are formally brought together so that they will eventually marry.”

“O-oh, no… I could never. A matchmaking meeting with Lady Ouka…”

“Indeed, you would never. Not with Her Majesty, at any rate. You will do so with a man. A man.”

Sasara went pale. This was news to her. She was utterly, emotionally unprepared…

“W-we don’t need to worry about this now… I am still just a high school student…”

“It is common practice to pick out your groom-to-be early in life. Especially considering that you are a daughter of the Tatsunami family. We will need an upstanding son-in-law for you.”

“Exactly. It might be best to decide who you are going to marry beforehand, even if the wedding is still years away.”

“You, too, Mother…?”

“In fact, we have already picked out a partner for you. Why don’t we schedule for next Sunday?”

“Whaaat! That’s much too soon!”

“If you don’t like that, then feel free to bring someone else on the day.”

At the last moment, a single avenue of escape was presented to Sasara.

“If you have found a future husband more admirable than the one we’ve chosen, then there will be no need for the meeting in the first place. That would be cause for celebration. Otherwise, you are not getting out of it.”

“How do you decide who is better…? Looks are a subjective measure, so would it be lineage…?”

“That would be decided on a case-by-case basis. If you find a man you think is fitting and worthy, then bring him along.”

“Who do you have coming to the meeting anyway?”

“Ah, it’s a man you know well. It’s your cousin, Masatsuna Toraha.”

“Whaaaaaat?! No, I cannot! I hate this! I would rather eat a beetle!” Sasara wrinkled her nose.

“Sasara, you are exaggerating… But everything about him is exquisite—his lineage, abilities as a warrior, and his looks, even if the latter measure is somewhat pedestrian. And I am certain—”

“—He will love you for life,” Maxwell said, finishing his wife’s sentence.

And Sasara knew it was true. Her cousin was earnest, stable, and skilled. So what made this so bad to her…?

The answer did not come to her right away.

But that was not good enough.

Just because.

Characters

Kiyomizu Jouryuuji

Ryouta's classmate from school in Japan, as well as his stalker. She followed him into the Sacred Blood Empire. Assassin for the Virginal Father.

Tamaki Shijou

Classmate of Shiren and Ryouta. She's typically calm and collected, but once she slips into a pessimistic mood, there's no coming back for a while.

Sasara Tatsunami

A personal guard for the emperor, Ouka. She is madly in love with her liege and will often act recklessly because of it.

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EPISODE 1

LET'S PLOT TO RUIN A FORMAL MATCHMAKING SESSION!

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EPISODE 1

LET'S PLOT TO RUIN A FORMAL MATCHMAKING SESSION!

Five forty AM. Time for Shiren Fuyukura to wake up.

She slowly poked her head out from under the covers. It was not for any laudable reason, like morning practice for a sports club or an early job or anything, however.

She wanted to bite and take a sip of her minion (candidate) Ryouta.

Her logic was that no good minion should wake up later than his master; therefore, this was a justified punishment.

"You're going to let me take a big, juicy bite out of you today, Ryouta. That is your role as my minion. Don't hold it against me."

She silently made her way down the hall and opened the door to Ryouta's room. Even though she was the emperor's younger sister, she felt like a cat burglar.

She successfully snuck into Ryouta's room. First she checked to see if he had any wasabi slathered on his neck. That had given her a real nasty surprise last time. He was getting smarter, so she couldn't afford to be too cocky.

"Hmm, he does not appear to be having a very pleasant rest."

Ryouta's sleeping face was screwed up in pain. Perhaps he was having a nightmare.

"…Cu…half… Heh…"

"Cu-half? A…calf? Odd nightmare…"

"Gonna kill me… Gonna cut me in half… Help me…"

"Hmm? What's happening in your dream?! Ryouta, hey!" Shiren reached out to shake Ryouta—but then stopped herself. "No, I should drink his blood first. That will help his dream end pleasantly. Yes, I'm sure of it."

In the end, she prioritized her own gain over saving Ryouta.

"Don't blame me for this, Ryouta…" With great vigor, Shiren swooped

down to bite into him.

"Agh! Help!"

And that was right when Ryouta snapped up out of bed.

Ergo: Ryouta's forehead →← Shiren's forehead.

Thunk.

There was a dull, heavy sound.

"Owww! Did you hit my head with a rock?!"

"Hey, don't sit up so suddenly! What an incredible counterattack!"

Both of them pressed their hands to their foreheads in pain.

"You deceived me, Ryouta… I cannot believe you'd even harm yourself to stop me…"

"I didn't deceive anyone! I just woke up from a nightmare!"

"A nightmare? Well, you did seem to be having an unpleasant sleep. What were you dreaming about? Did you go to a convenience store late at night only to find that they were sold out of the *Kairakuten* comic magazine, but you feel awkward leaving without buying anything, so you buy some snacks you didn't really want?"

"I've never bought that magazine in my life! And your dreams are way too specific! Where did you get that story?!"

"But what else is there? All I can really think of is discovering you hadn't put the rice on after you finished making the curry."

"Kinda mild for a nightmare."

"Did you realize you hadn't bought any tomatoes as you were making *chirashi-zushi*?"

"You don't need tomatoes for *chirashi-zushi*! What would you even do with them?!"

"The acidity from the tomatoes makes it taste better…" Shiren got easily upset when someone insulted tomatoes.

"Nightmares are about all kinds of things. Like getting chased by evil people, or falling off a bridge, or—"

"—Or you run into a high school girl who's running around with toast in her mouth."

"Are nightmares just comedy tropes to you?"

Some people would be excited to have an encounter like that. She was surprisingly lacking in her knowledge about nightmares.

Or maybe you don't have nightmares if your head is too empty? was a

thought that crossed Ryouta's mind.

"Then what kind of nightmare did you have? Be straight with me!" Shiren demanded, as though she'd realized he was making fun of her. Her long pigtails swung back and forth dramatically. "Oh, that's right, you were talking about being cut in half while you were asleep. Okay, so after you went to the convenience store late at night and saw they were sold out of the *Kairakuten* comic magazine, you felt awkward leaving without buying anything, so you bought some snacks you didn't really want, and then on your way home you got cut down by a rogue samurai?"

"What does the first half have to do with anything?! The only part that was relevant was the person cutting me with a sword! And by someone you know really well, Shiren!"

Shiren had an inkling of who he was talking about. It was easy to imagine which one of their mutual acquaintances might consider cutting Ryouta in half.

"Sasara almost killed me…" Ryouta's face went pale, remembering the dream more vividly.

It sure was a realistic dream… When he woke up, his first thought was that he was in the afterlife.

"Remember that time you went full beast mode and practically left Sasara for dead? It was back then, and Sasara practically beat me to a pulp."

"Ah… It was technically in self-defense, but I still did an awful thing…"

"I made her drink my blood then. Because I knew it could help her heal."

"Yeah. That was an unbelievably shameless thing to do, but she was one wrong step away from death. It's like CPR."

It was abnormal for one human to lick another human's blood, but to the Sacred Blooded, it proved to be an even bigger problem. In short, only people who loved each other very much did something like that.

"It was really an unbelievable dream…"

FLASHBACK MODE

SCENE: Empty school after classes are finished for the day.

"Um… Ryouta Fuyukura, I have something important to talk to you about…"

"You do? I do, too, actually…"

"To tell you the truth, my family found out I drank your blood…

And now I am being forced to marry you…"

"To tell *you* the truth, Shiren and I are going to get married…"

"What…?"

"Er, well… I know it's sudden, but it's basically a shotgun wedding __"

"You will die by my blade."

"Huh?"

"If you so choose to live in disgrace, then I will kill you and die myself!"

"Stop! Don't kill me! You don't have to die, either!"

"After I am dead, I will find happiness haunting Lady Ouka, so I do not care!"

"Don't turn into a ghost! Please just rest in peace!"

"Then I shall settle for writing a letter of apology."

"At least make it a real punishment! Is my murder really just worth one apology letter…?"

"Silence! Leave this earthly realm! I will hold a memorial service on the forty-ninth day after your death! Close your eyes! Yaaaaah!"

"She's gonna kill me! She's gonna cut me in half! Help me!"

"No help will come for you! You lady killer!"

"Agh! Help me!"

That was when he woke up and collided head-on with Shiren.

Even now that he was awake, the cold sweat still trickled down his face, and Shiren's presence right in front of him was making him uncomfortable.

Why the hell do we have to get married…? And a shotgun *wedding, at that? This whole thing is ridiculous and completely impossible…*

Why had a dream of all things reached such a dire point…? That whole nightmare had probably taken a year off his life.

He was scared to look directly at her now.

"Hmm…?" Shiren asked. "Is there something on my face?"

"No! Your face is normal!"

"Sasara, hmm? How frightening… The scariest part is how realistically possible the whole scenario is."

"Please, no… I'm not gonna take this as an omen."

"No, it's seriously possible. If the Tatsunami family finds out, then Sasara might not be the one who comes by. If they think you deflowered

their daughter, they'll send an assassin instead."

"Oh yeah, she's from a good family, isn't she…?" All she ever did was moan about Ouka, so it was easy to forget.

"Yes. One of the most famous families in the army. They're very particular about honor."

"Oh god, that's terrifying… I don't want to hear any more!"

After all the trouble he'd gone through to save her, it was too much to think that he would have to spend the rest of his life watching his back.

"Making her drink your blood has huge consequences. S-so…don't do it again, okay?"

"I—I know…"

Tamaki had also bitten him back at the festival, but he wasn't about to bring that up now.

"Just don't let anyone find out. I suppose the only ones who saw that were me and Big Sis, and Alfoncina. Kiyomizu…was passed out, so she wouldn't know. Yeah, w-we…we'll be a-all right…n-no…p-p-problem?"

"It sure sounds like a problem to me!"

"No, I was just thinking that Big Sis or Alfoncina might end up talking…"

"You're right… Maybe we should send them some sweets to keep them quiet? No, but then they might want more and start blackmailing us…"

Both Ouka and Alfoncina were at the center of the empire, so that would be borderline corruption. Ryouta and Shiren often found themselves dancing in the palms of their hands anyway.

"We should be fine, since no one else has found out…probably? Neither of them would talk; they know it would lead to a big incident."

"That's also true… And it was still just a dream."

Okay, time to recalibrate and start the day. Ryouta went to go make breakfast, talking to himself.

"That dream couldn't be a sign of what's to come, can it…?"

With an ominous feeling still in his chest, Ryouta went to school with Shiren and found things out of sorts there, too.

Sasara sat there staring, or at least that was Ryouta's impression when he entered the classroom. She was just sitting in her seat instead of staring

feverishly at Ouka or occasionally shooting spiteful glances Ryouta's way.

Instead, she appeared to be simply lost in thought. She wasn't paying attention to people coming into the classroom, at any rate.

"She's been like this all morning. It's a black Monday, I suppose," Ouka said.

"What? The stocks aren't crashing!"

She probably meant something more along the lines of the post-weekend Monday blues.

"Let's test to see just how off she is today." Ouka waved her hand in front of Sasara's face.

"Oh, a hand is moving…" She wasn't very responsive.

"I'll give you a kiss if you follow my orders."

"…How delightful."

"Isn't that strange? Her energy is so low today. I'd usually expect her to react with a stereotypical shonen manga nosebleed and then faint."

"If you were expecting that, shouldn't you have tried a less extreme test?"

"Once, she did almost bleed out. I increased the amount of reserve blood used for transfusions at each hospital."

"Her nosebleed changed the healthcare system?!"

Though Sasara was just her personal guard, Ouka still went all out for her.

"I wonder if something shocked her. It's like the time when Shijou got robbed."

When that had happened, Tamaki had exuded a powerful negative aura. But they did catch the thief, who now worked at the convenience store.

"She won't tell me what's wrong. She's been like this all morning. Come on, Sasara, tell us what you know."

"…I know nothing."

"Do you like me? You just want to get naughty with me, don't you?"

"……I do, of course. And I believe the emperor should not use such language."

"Ugh, what an infuriating response! You have no idea how angry this makes me! I can't explain it, but I feel spurned!" Ouka glowered at Sasara.

Sometimes, when you say something suggestive as a joke, the worst possible response is to be ignored.

“Calm down! We get that something’s off with Sasara!”

This was bad. There was no doubt now that Sasara was not herself today.

“In a way, hasn’t she matured if she’s acting like a normal high school girl now? I think our class will be a lot more peaceful. We already have lots of problem students in our class, after all.”

“Shiren, that is refreshingly sound logic, but it just makes you look more guilty when you say it.”

“What?! I stay sound asleep during lessons so that I don’t bother the other students!”

“You’re just slacking; you can’t pretend it’s to benefit someone else!”

Shiren slept through almost all of their classes. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that she basically only came to school to eat lunch.

“No, it’s the other way around. The classes are so boring that they put me to sleep, and that’s the real problem. The best teachers would conduct a class where the students who want to sleep would stay awake and listen!”

“You’re already planning to fall asleep! At least act like you’re making an effort to stay awake!”

“Seven words in our math textbook is enough to put me to sleep.”

She couldn’t even last one line.

“No, no, we’re not worried about you, Shiren. It’s Sasara that we need to worry about.”

It was as though Sasara’s original personality had up and vanished. She was nothing but a shell of herself.

“This is bad news for me, too. Who’s going to protect me if one of my own guards is indisposed?” Ouka sighed, tired and a slight bit uneasy.

She’s right. Sasara has been working with Ouka since before coming to the school. She can be real blunt sometimes, but she’s surprisingly ni—

“Oh, if a bullet comes flying my way, I want you to take it for me, Ryouta.”

“You’re not being very nice to me!”

Standing in for Sasara and putting his life at risk for Ouka was standard fare.

“I’ll talk to Alfoncina about your posthumous Buddhist name, and we’ll give it to you for free.”

“Not comforting at all, thanks!”

“We’ll have it be the Genuine Haa-rem Boi. How about that?”

“Why do you have to humiliate me after death, too?!”

“We’ll have the best patisserie in the Empire prepare the ceremonial food for your funeral.”

“Even better, let’s imagine me surviving!”

“This certainly is a grave situation. Ouka without Sasara is just as vulnerable as a hero who has changed out of armor to regular clothes. What a mess she would be in if an assassin were to show up!” Kiyomizu interjected.

Everyone stared at her coolly.

“Wh-what? Did I say anything that might harm public order and morality?”

“Everyone was thinking, *That’s rich, coming from you*.”

Kiyomizu Jouryuuji was originally an assassin for the Virginal Father, an organization formed to strike down the Sacred Blooded.

She had also come to the Empire to take down his companion Shiren (or so she claimed, but in actuality she had just come to see Ryouta). Now she’d changed her tune and was attending a Sacred Blood high school like it was no big deal.

“But what Jouryuuji says is correct. We can’t leave Sasara like this,” Ouka said.

“Let me take a look at her.” Kiyomizu came to stand in front of Sasara and stared right into her eyes.

Her expression was gravely serious, like a sumo wrestler standing before the ring.

“I see. There is nothing physically wrong with her, but she should be all right if she emotionally relaxes a bit.”

“What? That was enough to tell? Kiyomizu, are you trained in medicine or fortune-telling or something?”

“Ryouta Dearest, I have gone through some very serious training in the past.”

“Yeah… I forgot, considering how you normally act. So can you do something about her?”

“I don’t have the tools to conduct a restorative prayer in this country. I cannot procure all of the various items my esoteric practices require.”

“Right. I’d assumed you had everything you’d need, but that’s obviously

not true."

"It might be possible with another religion. The religious head of this country might be able to do something."

Well, she does go to school here, Ryouta thought.

Finally, lunchtime rolled around.

They gathered in the nurse's office.

"I heard what happened~. I'll be sure to help Sasara recover safely~."

They decided to go with a ritual to revive Sasara with Alfoncina's help.

Ouka had brought Sasara to the nurse's office, and Ryouta, Shiren, and Kiyomizu had tagged along.

"Why the nurse's office?" Ouka looked doubtfully at Alfoncina.

"Because the nurse's office has beds. And it's easier to do when she's lying down."

Sasara was resting quietly on one of the beds, although her mind was still somewhere else.

"Okay, but why are you wearing that?"

Inexplicably, Alfoncina was dressed as a nurse. "This is a ceremonial outfit in the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood. The white cloth symbolizes purity and lack of falsehoods."

"The embroidery on your chest says MEDICAL CORPORATION SACRED BLOOD COUNCIL SACRED BLOOD HOSPITAL."

She must have borrowed it.

"This is a ceremonial outfit in the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood. The white cloth symbolizes purity and lack of falsehoods."

"Hey!" cried Ouka. "You repeated yourself! You always start acting like an NPC once things get inconvenient!"

"I understand how you feel, Ouka, but that isn't helping us! Let's just listen to what she says!" Ryouta interjected, knowing they might never leave if he didn't. They wouldn't be finished by the end of lunch if Ouka kept commenting on every little thing.

"So what is it you're planning on doing, Alfoncina?" asked Shiren. "Explain it in a way that we can understand."

"In short, her brain has jammed, thanks to too many thoughts taking over her mind. I suppose it would be like stuffing a room so full of cushions

that it's impossible to push open the door."

"So we just need to remove the cushions, then."

"Exactly~. Which means Sasara will return to her old self if she can discharge some of those pent-up feelings. Of course, we must do something about whatever caused her to enter this state, or we'll soon be back where we started."

Ouka didn't completely buy this. "But with that metaphor, how are you supposed to open the door to get all the cushions out? We've tried talk therapy all morning, but she doesn't react."

"It's the same idea, Ouka~." Alfoncina grinned. "I'll temporarily open the door with a much, much stronger shock. I'm going to bring Sasara's excitement to unthinkable levels~."

"Uh-oh…" Ouka's face went bright red, probably because she sensed something terrible coming. "Let me say this now…that I'm not going to kiss her. I—I know I joke about it a lot, but I haven't had my first kiss yet… and no matter how dear a friend she is to me, I'm not so sure about giving it to her…"

"Ohhh? Your face tells me you have a specific someone in mind that you want to give your first kiss to~." Alfoncina's grin widened.

"N-not really… Kisses are so important to the Sacred Blooded… And I'm the emperor, so my kisses have political repercussions…"

Alfoncina must have hit a sore spot; Ouka's usual mischievous spirit was gone.

Shiren and Kiyomizu acted a bit huffy at seeing this side of Ouka.

"I don't like that expression on you, Big Sis. It's not fun," Shiren said.

"What a coincidence. I also feel a bit unsettled," Kiyomizu said.

"You're the emperor; have some majesty! The infatuated teen bit doesn't suit you."

"I think the same. Please just hook up with some prince of another land, already."

Shiren and Kiyomizu have really been on the same page recently, Ryouta thought absently to himself in the back. Nothing would make him happier than to see them get along.

"No need to worry~. You won't be touching Sasara at all, Ouka~."

"That's a relief to hear. An emperor has enough to worry about, you know. A lot…"

“That’s why I plan on using an avatar of you instead.”

An avatar?

Everyone there was wondering what that could possibly mean.

“You could call it a copy, in a sense, that has some of Ouka’s characteristics~.”

You can do that?

“What are you using for that? I haven’t brought anything special to school.”

“Oh, it’s all right~. Sasara already had the avatar of you, and it was in the school.”

“Wh-what? Out with it! Tell me!”

“I have it just behind that curtain. What, oh what, could it be~?”

Now that she mentioned it, there was an outline of something pressing against the fabric.

“I’m sorry you’re all into it now, but I’m not in the mood for a quiz. Show us!” The emperor whipped back the curtain.

There sat an Ouka body pillow.

“What is THIS?!!!!!!!!!!”

“A body pillow.”

“I know what it’s called! Sheesh… This is a sight I won’t soon forget. Ugh…”

“You didn’t even try to hide how you felt about it. Especially the part about it being gross.”

Ryouta had never seen such a raw reaction from her before.

It was even rarer to see her flinch so hard at the sight of something.

“Why am I wearing a gym uniform and bloomers?! Our school uniform doesn’t even have bloomers! None of the schools in the Empire do! And it’s so tight. You should have picked a looser-fitting outfit. And my shirt isn’t tucked in, so for a second it doesn’t look like I’m wearing anything underneath…”

Ouka was trembling—full-on shaking, really.

Ryouta wasn’t sure if the emotion was anger or fear.

“Oh, and here’s the back, by the way~.” Alfoncina turned the body

pillow around.

This image was of Ouka in her underwear. Lingerie would be a more apt word, if anything—and the mostly black ensemble was a titillating sight. Her expression was somehow sensual, somehow bewitching; her cheeks were a pale crimson, as though she wanted something from you.

Ouka was frozen for a short while.

"……I sentence you to death."

"Ouka, calm down! I know how you feel, but killing her is too much! Don't abuse your power!"

"Then I shall do it legally through court-martial! E-even if I did allow this body pillow, this expression is forbidden! I-I-I've never looked at anyone like this before!"

"This avatar is powerful, isn't it, if it can send the real thing to pieces so easily. Yes, yes." Alfoncina seemed satisfied. Why, exactly, no one could say.

"A single piece of cloth can heavily damage one's life. How terrifying."

"I think the one who made this is damaged."

"We'll be doing another run of the Rouko body pillows."

"You're the archbishop! Is that allowed?!"

Alfoncina was also a manga artist under the pen name of Kin Hayashimori. *You're Rouko, I'm Kouko!*, on sale now!

"There is no greater joy to an author than seeing her characters beloved by all."

"Please, do you really think an archbishop should be doing all this?!"

"Well, let's put the jokes aside for now."

"I have no idea what's a joke and what isn't anymore…"

"I'll use this avatar to pry open the door to Sasara's heart."

"This is worse than I thought…" Ouka groaned. Ryouta imagined she must be exhausted.

"As Sasara is lying on the bed, I'll place the avatar on top. I'm certain the shock will open her door."

"Just call it a body pillow! But will it really have any effect?"

"It's all right. You could even call this a ritual. Don't you think so, Kiyomizu?"

"Oh, yes. In Buddhist terms, this would be like the rite of becoming one with Vairocana, creator of space. If this girl worships the emperor as she

would the gods and Buddha, then those things together could cause a miracle."

"I dunno, listening to you talk makes me want to stop believing in Buddhism," Ryouta quipped.

"I have often used a Ryouta body pillow to—"

"Okay, Kiyomizu."

"So we just need to put this body pillow on her, then. Fine, I'll do it. We'll put the underwear side facedown…" Reluctantly holding the pillow, Ouka did the honors.

"Oh… Ah…" The catatonic Sasara finally reacted.

"Oh god, it actually worked…"

"Now we just need to wait for her door to open."

"Ah… Haa… Ahhng… No… Ahn! Hng… I… Ahhhh…"

"She's just making raunchy noises… Are you sure about this…?"

"Yes, that is the power of the avatar."

"You mean the power of the body pillow! But she's a lot more expressive now. Well, more lewd than expressive, really…"

Sasara's expression certain made it clear what she was imagining…

Gulp.

Ryouta's Adam's apple bobbed.

"Oh, Ryouta, you're not allowed to look at her! Turn around!"

"She's exactly right, Ryouta. Go look at the shelves over there. Read the medicine labels or something."

"Indeed, you mustn't be flustered listening to these lewd noises. You cannot look this way."

Shiren and Kiyomizu worked together to pull Ryouta away.

"Fine… There's a lot that's wrong with this situation…"

"And cover your ears."

"You should cover your ears."

"I get it, I get it!"

And then, thirty seconds later—

"Ah… Haaaugh… HaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!! Hmm? What have I…?" Sasara awakened.

"You're back, Sasara!"

"I feel as though I was in the middle of a long dream… But my head is so clear right now. I feel as though I've become a sage. I've come to

understand true wisdom.”

“You’re just having postcoital clarity.”

“Post…what?”

“…Nothing.”

“Why is this body pillow on me?”

She really did get her consciousness back with that. A body pillow wasn’t to be underestimated.

“There’s something I need to ask you, Sasara.”

“L-Lady Ouka…what might it be? You aren’t confessing your love to me, are you? I would gladly embrace a romance across the lines of class. Or if you would rather we run away, I will go with you to Abashiri or to Siberia—”

“What is this body pillow?”

“It depends on how many I get produced at one time, but one usually goes for roughly five thousand to six thousand sacred yen. One place has been making me batches of twenty at a time. I am spending quite a bit of money, since mine are a special order for personal use, but the high-quality fabric is worth the extra money.”

“I’m not asking about the production side of things!”

Everyone else in the room needed to watch Ouka closely in case she decided to strike Sasara for this.

“Ouka, I understand how you feel, but please hold it in!”

“I’ll get answers about these body pillows out of you next time… Ahem.” Ouka cleared her throat and shifted gears. “Sasara, something big’s been weighing on your mind, hasn’t it? That’s the reason you’ve been so distracted, right?”

“W-well…” Sasara hung her head.

Yeah, something was up.

“Say it. We can’t have you freezing like this again. I don’t want to fire my own personal guard.”

“No, please do not! Oh… Ryouta Fuyukura is here, too…”

When Sasara and Ryouta’s eyes met, Sasara seemed even more pained.

“Should I not be here…?” Ryouta asked. Really, he should have left when the whole avatar business started, but it was too late for that.

“I do not think so, since this is a private matter…” Sasara’s face went even redder. She couldn’t hide it anymore. After a few moments of silence,

she sighed. “Actually… I am to attend a formal marriage matchmaking meeting.”

Time seemed to stop—most high schoolers didn’t talk about this sort of thing at all.

“Aren’t you a little young for that?” Ryouta asked. “Well, you *are* a noble. Is this normal?”

“More or less. It is not unusual for nobility to settle on a marriage partner before they reach adulthood. But a formal wedding would be held at a later date. The earliest being after graduating from university.”

“Huh… That’s hard for a commoner like me to imagine…”

If he’d had that news dropped on him out of nowhere, he might end up freezing from the shock, too. This very thing had happened to Sasara anyway.

“I am still not ready…” Sasara hung her head again. She really hated this idea, more than he’d thought.

“Sasara.” Ouka clapped her hand on Sasara’s shoulder. There was a divine smile on her face.

“Are you going to save me, Lady Ouka?! Oh, yes, you would never abandon me, Lady Ouka!”

“Go to the matchmaking meeting.”

“…L-Lady Ouka?”

“It’s perfect. You are a noble, and for those of your status, it’s best to settle on who you’re going to marry sooner rather than later. I think it’s best you find a nice boy to keep now, and just forget about this unrequited love of yours. Feel free to find a partner. Oh, I’m so thoughtful of my retainers.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Don’t do that! That’s like rubbing salt in the wound!” Ryouta stepped in. This would be too much for Sasara.

“What? I haven’t said anything strange. If she was being forced when she was already dating someone, that would be another story. But Sasara isn’t dating anyone.”

“Lady Ouka, let’s—”

“Right? You have no one.”

“You just ignore her when it’s convenient for you, don’t you…?”

Sasara/Ouka was rapidly sinking, which wasn’t much of a surprise.

“It’s not like you’re holding a wedding. It’s just a meeting. If you don’t like him, then you can say no. Maybe he’s only into figurines and body

pillows, and you can throw him out."

"I know what you're trying to say, but Sasara would be kind of a hypocrite if she refused for that reason…"

The Ouka body pillow was still on the bed. *Please, someone take that thing away.*

"But you *can* say no, so it's not a bad idea just to meet him. Explore all your options."

"I wouldn't be so upset if I could say no that easily…" Sasara was not being cheered. Her head drooped lower and lower…and straight into the body pillow.

"Sasara! What on earth are you trying to do?!"

"Please help me, Lady Ouka. Hnnng…the smell of sweat on your gym uniform is so sweet… Hnnng…"

"Stop talking to the pillow! Why are you pretending this is happening after gym class?! You do not have the right to profit from my image! Give me royalties!"

"Royalties are not the issue here! Calm down, both of you! This conversation is getting way off track! Is there a reason why you can't just say no, Sasara?" Ryouta righted the course.

"There is. It isn't just a meeting. My father fully intended for me to marry a nobleman from the beginning… I remember hearing about it before…"

"Well, it is matchmaking for the nobility, after all… That's probably a part of the whole thing…"

Though it was compulsory for her, the meeting was considered a formality to gain both parties' consent.

"My father told me that if I wanted to cancel the meeting, then I should bring along another prospective partner. The one I'm meeting is their top contender, and he plans on pairing me up with him since no one else is as good…"

"Oh, that is a nuisance. The inability to choose must be so troubling. How awful he would be if he turns out to be the type to moan into body pillows. I would run away from home if I were paired with a pervert who moaned into body pillows."

"You really hate that body pillow, huh?"

"Should I not? Would you rather I say, *Wow, thanks for making me into a*

body pillow? I could never. That would be like Shiren getting fifty percent on a math test."

"Don't insult your little sister! I bet she could get fifty percent if she put in the work! C'mon, Shiren, say something!" Ryouta complained.

"Yeah, that would never happen." Shiren acknowledged the impossibility in a snap. "Some things simply aren't meant to be. You're so wise, Big Sis."

"Does she have no idea she's being mocked…? She is an honest-to-Buddha fool…" Kiyomizu flinched back from Shiren a bit as well.

"Oh yeah, I just thought of something. Why don't we take a picture of Sasara all over this body pillow and then show it to the guy? He might even call off the meeting." Ryouta smiled confidently. It was a pretty slick idea, if he did say so himself.

"That would not be enough… He is the type to say *I will love you through all your faults*."

"I've got a feeling this is going to be a good, openhearted guy… But there's no point if Sasara's not happy with it. I guess our only choice is to ruin the meeting itself. Oh, and that's easy, too." Ryouta came up with another great idea. "We could just cancel it on Ouka's orders. Sasara's father would have no choice but to obey if the emperor herself commanded it."

Ouka snorted. "Ha. Commoners never think things through." She didn't pull her punches.

"Was…what I said that embarrassing?"

"If this were a matter of national importance, I would step in, of course. That is the emperor's job, after all. But a matchmaking meeting is a domestic problem for the Tatsunami family. The emperor has no right to meddle. The only case where I could interfere would involve a marriage to someone from an enemy country."

She had a point; it was terrifying to imagine the state commanding A and B to marry, or C and D to start dating.

"It's normal for noble families to discuss matchmaking, and the boy is a noble, too, isn't he? I have no grounds to cancel it."

Then the only other option was—

"That means we'll have to find another candidate. You just need a stand-in, right? Someone can just act as Sasara's boyfriend for a short period."

“That would be difficult…” Ouka frowned. “First, the candidate would have to at least be a noble. He won’t be considered at all otherwise. And Sasara—”

“The people of this world can be divided into me, Lady Ouka, and others.”

“—As you can see, Sasara has never thought about boys at all. She is not close to any male nobles. And even if we ask one to act as a stand-in, he’ll just end up running away. This whole thing is a truly life-threatening situation.”

“Life-threatening? How?”

Were these meetings really that dangerous? Was there a rule that matchmaking in the Sacred Blood Empire had to take place in a war zone?

“Nobles have all sorts of rules and etiquette, but I’m not inclined to go to the trouble of explaining.” Ouka sighed. “We really don’t have anyone…” She sighed again. Not even Ouka the tactician could come up with a perfect plan.

“It’s all right. This is fate. I shall go to the meeting. I won’t be marrying him straightaway, so I’ll find a way…” Sasara’s lips were trembling. She was frightened—so frightened that she had to hide her fear behind the word *fate*.

“I apologize for making you worry. Lunch will be over soon, so I should also return to the—”

“W-wait! Just let me think a little longer! Trust me!” Ouka was panicking. She seemed conflicted. “We just have to send in some noble boy for the matchmaking, right…? And a member of my personal guard would have an especially suitable position… And in *that* case, I do have some ideas. That’s all right so far.” It sounded like Ouka had already picked someone out for the job. “But it’s still a matchmaking meeting. If we present him as a candidate, you might marry him immediately… Maybe I should quietly change the law…” Whatever her idea was, she was hesitant to take that option.

“I understand what you’re thinking, Big Sis. But I don’t think that’s a good idea…? See, I’d say it would be…unnatural, or something, to send a human that’s essentially someone else’s minion as a candidate… I’m…I’m certain you can come up with a better idea. Why don’t we keep consulting right here!” Shiren had a lot on her mind, too.

“Can’t the both of you just say who you’re thinking of? We can’t do anything without—”

““‘Shut up, Ryouta!’””

“Agh! Shot down in perfect unison!”

Somewhat cowed, Ryouta turned his gaze away—and his eyes suddenly met with Sasara’s.

Her expression was anxious, like a swimmer flailing for something to grab on to; it was entirely unfitting for a warrior.

I can’t just leave her when she’s so obviously upset. We have to help her.

He couldn’t ignore someone in pain, and his hand rose on its own. “What if I do it?”

Everyone there turned to look at him.

“Ryouta, are you sure you’ve thought this through?” said Ouka. “This is a big decision, you know? You’re not just going to hang out for a bit.”

“Consider it carefully, Ryouta!” added Shiren. “I’m sure a great idea that will neatly solve this whole thing and benefit all of us and all of society will fall right into our laps!”

Both sisters seemed pretty desperate to stop him.

“There is no need for you to do such thing, Ryouta dearest! You simply need to live for me! I know you are kind, but please just ignore everything else!”

“Kiyomizu, aren’t Buddhist families supposed to be more, y’know, selfless…?”

If they were, those Buddhist values hadn’t been instilled too deeply into her.

“O-of course, I’ll offer charitable donations—lending a hand to someone in need is a laudable practice. But…”

“Right? Shiren’s also told me that I should serve people in trouble, and I figured this counts… So I just…”

“Oh! You may be right…”

“Yeah! And aren’t I technically like one of Ouka’s personal guard? That’d be perfect for a temporary candidate, then. I’m also one of Sasara’s classmates. It’s not like you could call up some random master swordsman she’s never met, right?”

Ouka and Shiren stared scornfully at him.

Wait, did I say something wrong…?

“You’re right, Ryouta. That is a good, sound argument… It’s such a good argument that it pains me…”

“I suppose we have no choice… Go on, serve someone in need, then…”

They both seemed to hate the idea, but they did give in.

“Okay, Ryouta, let me remind you of one thing as your master.” Shiren pointed at him sternly.

“What is it?”

“Don’t you dare, *don’t you dare*, make a mistake!”

“A mistake? What do you—?”

“I mean a mistake. There is no other word for it. Your role is to obstruct the marriage matchmaking. That is all. Be aware that you do nothing more than that!”

“I know that…”

And so he got his master’s permission.

“—Well, there you have it, Sasara. I’ll go stop this meeting.” Ryouta pointed to himself.

“What…?” Sasara, who had been absently listening to their conversation, inhaled sharply.

“I may not look like much, but I am technically a noble. Ouka even formally gave me a sword. I know it’s not traditional, but that does make me qualify, right?”

“Y-you misunderstand… I do not like you at all, not-one-bit…” Sasara’s mumbling sped up as her face went red.

Ryouta couldn’t remember seeing her so nervous.

“I know that. But you need a guy to go with you to ruin the meeting, so, y’know, it’s better than nothing,” Ryouta said.

If she was going to cry, then she should at least do so knowing she’d put up a good fight.

Ryouta had escaped plenty of sticky situations by stubbornly refusing to throw in the towel. He just needed to do the same this time.

“Are you truly sure about this?” Sasara asked.

“I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t.”

“Why would you go so far to help me…?”

“I mean, you’re my classmate, so I gotta lend a hand, right? I think you’d do the same for me.”

“Have you made up your mind? This isn’t just carrying my books to

class or something.”

“Well, obviously. But I still plan on carrying out my job.”

“This is the point of no return.”

“You don’t have to remind me so many times; it’s getting annoying… I’ll do it! I’ll take care of it!”

“Very well. But victory will be terribly hard-won. **You will have to do battle with the other man.**”

“Huh? Battle?”

“Another man will be coming to the matchmaking meeting, and your presence will be an insult to the other noble. You will be unable to call off the meeting if you cannot defeat the other and prove your superiority.”

“See, life-threatening.” Ouka stared hard at Ryouta. “That’s why I wasn’t sure if I should single you out. After you volunteered yourself, so there’s not much else I can do.”

Ryouta was beginning to suspect that he’d signed his own death warrant. “Who is the other guy anyway? I mean, I’ve still participated in a few fights, so if he’s a novice…”

“Masatsuna Toraha—my cousin and martial arts master, said to be the strongest swordsman of the younger generation. I believe he won first prize in the under-twenty division in the last sword fighting tournament.”

“What…?”

“Ah, he was also a kendo champion in Japan before the Empire was established. They called him Masatsuna the Tiger.”

“What…?”

“And he’s very serious. He values his honor, so he will be very cross if he hears of another man coming to the meeting. And the battle will be a serious affair. No one will be tried for a crime if the outcome is fatal. I hope you are ready.”

“I don’t want to be ready…”

Pat, pat.

Ouka patted Ryouta on the shoulder.

Pat, pat.

Alfoncina did the same.

“What is it, you two?”

““A posthumous name will cost 500,000 sacred yen.””

“Don’t assume I’m going to die! And you said it was going to be free

this morning, Ouka!”

How selfish were they?!

It was Kiyomizu’s turn to put a less-than-reassuring hand on his shoulder. “I will, of course, give you a free posthumous name, a free funeral, and build your grave in the best spot.”

“Thanks, I appreciate the sentiment! Could you all do something about this while I’m still alive?!”

Ouka placed her hand on her chin to think. “Then perhaps I’ll collect the funds to build a memorial hall honoring you just in case something happens, Ryouta. It’s not like we’ll be able to build it right after you die.”

“I’m not talking about plans for my death! I’ll survive! I *will* survive, just you watch!”

“We’ll place all the copies of your *Kairakuten* magazines on display.”

“You’re just doing this to spite me! And I’ve never bought any of those! I don’t buy porn mags!”

Poke, poke.

It wasn’t a pat this time.

Shiren was jabbing her fingers into Ryouta’s eyes. “Owwwwwwwww! Why did you pick *then* to poke my eyes?!”

“Sorry. My anger just flared up, and my fingers went right into your eyes. I regret it now. I’ll carry this guilt with me for at least the next two or three minutes.”

“Instant noodles take longer than that!”

Shiren was oddly upset. She pulled on his collar to bring him closer. “Whenever you’re around girls, you… Agh! I’m so mad!”

Sasara watched Shiren guiltily.

“My, you certainly have your hands full~,” said Alfoncina. “I must do what I can as your archbishop to alleviate your worries~. Depending on your donation, of course.”

“Everything comes down to money with you!”

“Hmm, well, part of that wasn’t actually a joke…”

“Indeed. It was not a very good joke,” Kiyomizu agreed before approaching Alfoncina and whispering to her.

“So it’s happening, then? It must be dangerous,” Alfoncina mused.

“Calamity approaches.”

“Will we be able to avoid it?”

“That depends on how much effort we put into averting it, but… No, I will protect Ryouta dearest!”

“You’re right, I suppose nothing is set in stone yet, is it?”

Alfoncina and Kiyomizu nodded to each other.

Ryouta, still entirely clueless, just hoped the pain in his eyes would go away soon.

Characters

Alfoncina XIII

The archbishop of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood. She boasts of her idol-like popularity throughout the Empire. She is an older student at Ryouta's school. Her real name is Matsuko Kimura.

Rei Asagiri

Ryouta's big sister. Her infatuation with her younger brother drove her to follow him to the Empire. She now works as a ninja for Ouka, the emperor.

Kokoko

The daughter of a god who had been enshrined in the Empire's mountains. She calls herself a fox, but she has rabbit ears. She works at Nine-to-Eleven, Tamaki's family's convenience store.

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EPISODE 2

LET'S TRAIN FOR THE FORMAL MATCHMAKING SESSION!

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EPISODE 2

LET'S TRAIN FOR THE FORMAL MATCHMAKING SESSION!

"Ughhhh…"

Ryouta spent the whole night sighing. How did he end up in a predicament like this…?

He would start training with Sasara right away tomorrow. He needed to get stronger within the week, or this week would be his last.

But will that be enough…? Without some serious training, this will be impossible…

Even after Ryouta said he was up for the challenge, Sasara had worriedly asked, "Are you sure you're all right with this…? If you're scared, you may honestly say so." But after all that, he couldn't back out just because he was scared.

As he sat despondent in a chair in the living room, a voice called out to him.

"What's wrong? You seem down." Ryouta's older sister, Rei, peered at him.

She was originally a combat specialist belonging to Oshiro's Special Measures Division, but she was now working as a ninja for Ouka here in the Empire. She came to their house at night to act as Shiren's tutor.

"Be sure not to force yourself, *ehem, ehem*…"

"I'm more worried about you. When am I not?"

"I'm fi— *Ahem, ahem, ehem, ehem*."

Rei was haunted by enraged spirits, which meant she'd always been sickly and unlucky. But on the flip side, her curse also served a protective role. She was rather difficult to get rid of.

"My coughing's been getting a lot worse recently. I haven't been able to breathe well, and my consciousness sometimes escapes me. *Ehem, ehem.*"

"Maybe don't sound so blasé about that!"

Rei was constantly on the verge of dying, but she hadn't crossed over yet. "Last time, I was right in front of a pretty field of flowers. As I started walking toward it, I woke up."

"That was close! You're not allowed to go to the flower field!"

She would have crossed into the afterlife, otherwise.

"Oh, yeah," said Ryouta. "You know a lot about the Empire, Rei. Do you know about the Toraha family?"

"Yes. They're rather famous. They've been around for hundreds of years—I believe they're a warrior family. Nowadays, they're a well-established family of master swordsmen."

"I knew this would be risky… Okay, so, just throwing this out there, but say the son from the Toraha family was supposed to have an arranged marriage meeting with a girl from another family, but another boy came with her and announced that he was her boyfriend. What would happen?"

"That's a strangely specific question~. *Ehem.*"

It didn't seem like Rei knew already, so it was probably best not to tell her. Didn't want her to pass out from the shock.

"Let's see~. Toraha may see it as an insult. The other boy would certainly be *ehem*ed."

"Sorry. I think you coughed over the most important part. I mean, I can guess, but tell me again?"

"To use another word, he would be *ehem*ed, bru*ehem*ed. I am certain he would *ehem* his last. The challenger would essentially be picking a fight with the Toraha family, and they will not let a challenge go unmet."

"Am I supposed to fill in the blanks?! That's *kill*, *slaughter*, *-taliz-*, and *breathe*, right?!"

What he was about to do was unthinkable.

I've fought with Sasara, Rei, and the boulder god I met with Shijou, and now I have to fight again…

"Aww, so sad. Your head's almost touching your knees." Rei peered at Ryouta's face. "Listen… If there's anything that's bothering you, you let me know. I'll make you feel better."

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“Rei…”

She was Ryouta’s only blood relative in this nonsensical empire, and he definitely wished he could confide in her sometimes.

But this wasn’t something he could rely on her for. His only choice was to take responsibility for his own choices.

“I appreciate it. And—Rei, could you scooch back a little?”

It was almost like she was trying to give him a kiss.

What? No, she’d never do that.

“You can tell me anything, Ryo. I’ll accept anything from your mouth. Even your breath.”

“You’re way too close, Rei! Your nose is about to hit mine…”

“If you’re upset, this is the best way to get rid of that stress. It’s much easier to calm down with body-to-body contact than by talking alone.” Rei looked serious.

“You’re joking, right…? I said no. Even if you are joking, brothers and sisters can’t, y’know…”

Klack.

The living room door opened.

“Phew, that was a nice bath. It’s your turn, Ryouta!”

Shiren was back from her bath with a waft of steam rising from her head.

Ryouta had a terrible feeling about this. Would she misunderstand again and assume they had been about to kiss…? It would definitely be a misunderstanding. They hadn’t almost kissed, right…?

“Hmm? Why are you up there, Rei?” Ryouta had spotted his sister clinging to a corner in the ceiling. She had sensed the danger.

“Well, when you work as a ninja, you start finding comfort in these sorts of places~.”

“You’re really burying yourself in that corner. You’re practically *in* the wall. Are you okay?”

“Oh, it’s just the Ninja Through-Wall Technique… Just kidding! Gosh, I jumped up here in such a panic that I got stuck. I wonder if I broke a bone, *ehem, ehem*.”

“Breaking a bone isn’t exactly a little whoopsie, but if my tutor is injured, then I guess that means no studying for today.”

“Indeed, that’s fine.”

If Shiren had chosen to interrogate Ryouta, this could have gone south very quickly, but the conversation turned to the cancellation of their studies.

"By the way, Ryouta, be careful in your training with Sasara tomorrow."

"Yeah, I know…"

Shiren was being mindful of him in her own way, and the idea that she cared for her minion lifted his spirits.

"But Sasara's softened up a little, and I doubt she'll try and hurt me. That Toraha guy, on the other hand…"

"No, that doesn't matter."

"What?"

Then what had she actually meant?

"Just make sure that in the heat of training, you don't push Sasara down, or let her push you down, or try and kiss each other—nothing like that. This stuff seems to happen to you a lot…"

"N-no, it doesn't!"

Shiren's face was bright red—even redder than it should be for someone fresh out of the bath.

"Come on, you're supposed to be worried about my safety. I'm still your minion, you know…"

"Minion…" Shiren blushed harder.

It almost shocked Ryouta how red her face could get. "I—I didn't say anything embarrassing… I'm just telling you the truth…"

"I'm not embarrassed! I'm not embarrassed at all! Don't mention these thing to your master!"

Whap, whap!

Shiren smacked him, though not with enough force to hurt.

"You just need to be careful… I've been anxious lately, watching you get close with so many other girls… You're not forbidden to have a relationship, obviously. I just don't want you to forget that you're still my minion…"

"I—I know that…"

"You must serve me, okay…?"

An awkward silence settled in the room. Now Ryouta was blushing scarlet, too.

"Mm~. What an interesting development to watch from up here~. *Ehem! Ehem!*" Rei coughed loudly and reproachfully.

Shiren doesn't need to worry, Ryouta thought. *Sasara can't stand me; I doubt she'd ever actually like me.*

The next day, Tuesday, after classes were done, Ryouta stood waiting in front of what apparently used to be a middle school.

In fact, it *was* an old middle school.

When Akinomiya had become the Sacred Blood Empire, the school districts were rearranged and some of the buildings had been repurposed for other uses. Including this one.

It was far outside the city center, which made it a bit of a pain to get to. The bike ride here had taken a long time.

"I think I got here too early… I don't think she'll be here for a while…"

All he could see from where he stood in front of the gates was a field. The Empire was situated in a basin surrounded by mountains, so many places were pastoral like this.

He'd be able to see Sasara arrive, and there was no sign of her anywhere.

"Well, I still have another fifteen minutes, so I guess I can just wa—"

"There you are," he heard someone say behind him.

He turned to see Sasara in her school uniform.

"Whoa! Where did you come from?!"

She had apparently been on the other side of the school gate.

"Had I been waiting out front, people might assume you and I were having some sort of tryst. So I came in the back way."

"No one would think that."

Everyone at school knew Sasara was obsessed with Ouka. No one would believe a rumor that she liked a boy, not even as a joke.

"S-silence, you… You could at least *try* not to wholly reject me!"

"Why are you angry?!"

What did he say that was so upsetting?

He still wasn't entirely sure how to treat her. If anything, it was getting more difficult as time went on. Before, she'd only ever paid any mind to Ouka, but something was a little different now.

He wasn't exactly sure *what* was different, though…

Sasara blinked, as though she'd suddenly come to her senses.

“I—I—I—I mean…we must both be mentally prepared… You are my provisional boyfriend in this stratagem. How will anyone believe we are a couple if even *you* don’t believe it? Th-th-th-th-that’s what I mean!”

“Oh yeah, you’re probably right…”

Though it was only a temporary ploy for a very small audience, they still had to fool the people around them.

“By the way, how are we supposed to be training in a creepy abandoned school?”

The place was quiet and not terribly exciting.

“Follow me.” Sasara walked off briskly, and Ryouta followed her.

They entered the grounds from a side entrance.

“Are you sure we can break in?” Ryouta asked.

“We are not breaking in. No one from the Tatsunami family would ever stoop to burglary.”

They came to a building that was similar to a gym.

The floor was covered in tatami mats, the kind Ryouta would have seen at a judo match or something similar.

“This is the martial arts training gym run by the Empire. You can use it as much as you like, so long as you submit a notice ahead of time. It is essentially unheard of for an outsider to come in without a reservation, of course.”

“I see. If someone found out we suddenly started training, they’d wonder what was up.”

It was the perfect spot for secret training.

“Here is where I will do what I can to develop your skills to a level where you will be able to defeat Masatsuna. It will be a lot of work.”

“So this Masatsuna guy is really tough, huh?”

“Rumor has it that he has saved Earth from danger a number of times.”

“Who the hell is he?!”

“His achievements thus far are typically summarized through the Dark Martial Arts Tournament arc, the Door to the Samurai World arc, and the Samurai World Unification Tournament arc.”

“What is this, an action manga?”

“Personally, I found his battle against Musashi-Kosugi Miyamoto at the very beginning to be the most interesting.”

“An action manga that plagiarizes the names from other manga.”

“I hear he was the strongest swordsman in the Musashi-Kosugi Station in Kawasaki, Kanagawa prefecture.”

“Just the station?”

Ryouta tried to form a vague picture of Masatsuna Toraha in his head, and he saw a man with bulging muscles, like a super Saiyan. He couldn’t beat that.

“At the very least, he is more powerful than I am. There is no uncertainty in his blade. W-well…there *are* other options if we give up when it proves to be too difficult… I do not wish to use that, though…”

“There’s another way?”

“For a last-ditch emergency situation. But we should assume you will be fighting against Masatsuna.”

“Yeah, I’ve already committed… I’m scared…”

As gloom settled over Ryouta, Sasara disappeared into what looked like a storeroom.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said when she returned, wearing her kendo *gi*. She looked like a coach.

“Whoa…”

“Is something the matter?”

“No, the look just really works for you.”

Her Western-style knight armor was probably her official manner of dress, but the more samurai-esque getup fit her perfectly, too.

“You can keep such thoughts to yourself…” Her face was slightly flushed, as though embarrassed by the compliment.

“Oh, and you have your chest wrapped…”

Her chest was bound firmly in place, although he could just scarcely see it through her *gi*.

Sasara’s face flushed even redder. “All you do is point out irrelevant and trivial details! I do this so my chest does not get in the way!” Her chest was on the larger side, so she needed to take measures like that.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that… Forget it…”

“Now pick whatever sword you like.” Sasara held out several wooden training swords.

“Now, take it in hand.”

Ryouta grabbed one and found it was a lot heavier than he thought.

“Let’s get started.”

They stood opposite each other.

“We’ll perform all the training we need. I will not hear any complaints from you!”

“It’s been a while since we did it.”

“D-did it? Eep—!” Sasara was in a state of panic before they even began; she was as out of breath as if they’d just finished a match. “Y-you cannot just say that!”

“Huh? But I didn’t say anything…”

“Anyway, let’s begin! First we’ll begin with a freestyle sparring match with no time limit. I will see just how skilled you are!”

Their match began, and Sasara rushed right in for the first strike.

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“All right, let’s go!” Ryouta knew a bit about kendo.

Due to the curse his grandfather cast on him, the one that made him super-attractive to human women, he had often been attacked by girls in the kendo and judo clubs. In order to protect himself, he’d practiced the basics. He wasn’t a total amateur, at least.

But Sasara’s blows were heavy, and his moves were inefficient. She was slowly pushing him back.

“What’s the matter?!” she called. “You were much stronger last time we fought!”

“You really are the emperor’s personal guard… I can’t even get close. I guess that’d be the first thing to practice. I need to get right up in you.”

“Eep! In me?!” Sasara immediately let down her guard, so—

Thwap.

Ryouta hit her lightly on the torso. “Your torso was wide open. A newbie would be more alert than that…”

“I only let down my guard because you keep *saying* things… What a coward you are!”

“Why are you calling me a coward…?”

This conversation made no sense at all to Ryouta.

Sasara turned slightly and started murmuring. “Don’t think about it, don’t think about it. Great sun, everyone but Lady Ouka is an insect… Simply ignore it, like the dust on the wind. Yes, Ryouta Fuyukura is dust. Dirt. Trash. Garbage.”

“It sounds like you’re being really rude to me!”

Or ignoring his status as a human anyway.

“All right, I will collect myself and go again!” Sasara cried.

“This time, I’ll thrust right into your defenses!”

“Th-th-th… Into my— Thru-thru—” Sasara panicked. It was like someone in Dragon Quest had cast Fuddle on her.

“*Men*!” Ryouta called, claiming the point for a surprisingly easy head strike. “Hey, you’re making this way too easy, Sasara. Could you take this more seriously?”

“This is because you *insist* on being lewd! Coward!”

She struck him in the side.

It was a brilliant hit, and Ryouta crumpled on the spot.

“Buh—! And a surprise attack isn’t cowardly…? Or are you teaching

me to never let my guard down…?”

“Oh, I’m sorry! I did not intend to… My hands just…” Sasara brought both hands together in a genuine gesture of apology.

“Oh, just a coincidence, then. Wow, I’m still impressed, Sasara. You move fast.”

“I do *not* move fast! I am willing to wait!” She jabbed him in the side again.

“G-buh! Is this a Tatsunami family technique…? This training is so strict…”

He was getting beaten to a pulp without even getting any practice in.

“No! It simply happened… An unfortunate event, like fastening a button through the wrong hole…”

She didn’t seem to actively intend any harm, but Ryouta was suffering greatly anyway.

“I’m totally lost now, so let’s just keep going…”

“Indeed. We should officially reset.”

They once again came to stand opposite one another.

Oh, Sasara’s for real this time. She’s got a warrior’s eyes.

He could tell from her expression that she wasn’t playing around.

After all was said and done, their bond had been forged in a battle of life and death before. In a way, their relationship was already deeper than any lovers’.

“Now come at me. Show me what you are made of, Ryouta Fuyukura!”

“Yeah. With all your experience, I’m sure you’ve got plenty of chestnuts to share; I’m glad to have a hand in it.”

“A-a hand on my chest? No!” Again, Sasara was wide open. “What would you do in such a situation, then…? I cannot imagine what you would…”

“You’re all stiff again… You think you need a massage or something?”

“You would massage them! I cannot have this!”

“I’m just gonna ignore you… Focus, focus…” Ryouta slowly licked his lips. “Mm…”

“You would lick them?! Massage *and* lick them?! Is this a baby role-play fetish?! You may beg all you like, but I will only ignore you… I am too embarrassed to live right now…”

“Hey, you’re making this too easy.” He had a feeling that she was

getting weaker every time he spoke. “What is going on?! I’m not ranked in kendo or anything. I never really sank my teeth into practice.”

“Your teeth…?! You would bite them, too?! You are going to nibble on me?! Cover me in love bites?! Are you aiming to be world champion in perversion?!” Sasara’s hand whipped toward her chest, as though she was trying to protect herself.

“Wait, I’m not gonna do anything… What did I say to make you so on edge…?”

“Please, do not look so innocent… This is all you ever think about, isn’t it…? I cannot forgive this…”

“You know I’m just trying to concentrate on practice, right?”

“But if you insist and you will *only* be touching them, then… You are, in a way, the one who saved my life… If that is all, then I might perhaps allow it…”

“Hey, you know you’re barely holding on to your sword anymore because you’ve got your hand on your chest…” Even an amateur like Ryouta was starting to doubt that this would improve his swordsmanship in any way. “You’re not playing around, are you?”

“I am not! But I—I—I can hardly even imagine someone grabbing my chest! I cannot stand this disgrace!” Sasara complained, her face burning red.

“What are you talking about…? I’m so lost… I don’t even know where to start…”

“Ah, so I see you’re still calculating your first move… Please, just get this over with and come!”

“*Men*.” Ryouta lightly tapped his sword onto her head again. “Sasara, you’re not okay.”

“This is all your fault…”

“How is it *my* fault? This makes no sense at all…”

Sasara could scarcely look Ryouta in the eye anymore.

“Am I so bad at this that you can’t give me a real fight?” he asked sadly. He’d rather she just beat him to a pulp; at least that wouldn’t be so embarrassing.

“I’m sorry… I cannot seem to bring myself up to form… I do not mean to pull my punches…” Sasara sank to the floor.

“Well, I’m not here to fool around,” Ryouta said with the most powerful

voice he could muster, and he glared at Sasara.

"I… I am not sure how to respond to that…" Despite the lack of exercise, her face was scarlet again.

"I want to do it with you," Ryouta said. "I want to give it everything we've got."

"P-please, stop… I am entirely uncertain of what to do… I know I took your blood, but… I doubt I can take the next step…"

Ryouta wasn't sure what was going on inside her head, but he could tell she was refusing to go all-out. She sounded unsure about fighting at all now.

"Why? Come at me with all you got."

"All I have? Th-th-th-this is my first time…"

Why would she tell such an obvious lie? Her skill's good enough for her to be a personal guard of the emperor. She's obviously practiced with a sword before.

Ryouta was slowly starting to get irritated. They had no time, and definitely not enough to be playing around. They needed to get some solid practice in.

"You want to do this! I know you do!"

Plus, Sasara was the one who'd summoned Ryouta for training in the first place. Why was she suddenly reneging on their deal?

"A—a—a—a—a—a girl like me could never answer that question!"

Maybe it was unladylike for a girl to declare the start of a fight…?

Her eyes were darting every which way, looking anywhere but at Ryouta. What was she saying? This would greatly impact her life, too.

Ryouta held out his hand to her. "C'mon, stand up."

"W-we'll do it standing?"

"I mean, you're supposed to, right? Do some people do it sitting?"

"I always thought you did it lying down…"

"How unmotivated are you right now? How are we supposed to practice lying down?"

Regardless, Sasara timidly took Ryouta's hand and pulled to her feet in a somewhat resolute manner.

"Please, take the lead… I have no idea what to do. I'm certain you… you've done it many times with Shiren Fuyukura at home, have you not?"

"What? She bites me sometimes, but we've never done this at home."

“Ah, I see, so you do it with biting…”

“It hurts, so I sometimes put on wasabi to fight back.”

“What an eccentric approach…”

“Hmm… I guess wasabi is a little unusual… But I can’t say biting is normal, either…” The word *eccentric* stung a bit, even though he knew she was probably right.

“Come, I am ready… But please know that it is Lady Ouka that I love! There will be no love in this!”

“Obviously. There doesn’t have to be any love at all in this.” Love was a major undertaking, and this was just a practice round.

“No love…? You truly are a player, aren’t you…? All you need are the pleasures of the body, I see…”

“No, I’m not playing around. I’m being serious… That’s why I want you to take it seriously, too…”

“O-of course… Love and sincerity are entirely different things…”

Finally, she seemed ready, and Ryouta wondered if she would give him a real fight now.

“All right, here I come!”

“Okay!” Sasara replied with vigor.

But it was difficult to imagine that she was truly prepared when she had her eyes closed.

Don’t tell me she’s using some special master technique—“looking with her heart” or something.

Should he even take the step forward? He couldn’t ignore the possibility that this was a very thoroughly prepared trap.

Well, there was nothing for it now. Sasara had clearly announced she was ready, so he couldn’t pull back now.

“Aaaaaargh!” He dashed forward. “*Men*!”

The head strike was wide open.

“That hurt…”

Ff-thunk. Sasara collapsed to the floor.

“Hey, are you okay…? You don’t look so good… Wh-when you said you were ready, what did you mean? Ready to get hit?”

Ryouta stood over Sasara. His question echoed through the gym without an answer.

Sasara was incredibly weak afterward, too.

The session hadn't served as good practice at all.

"Why are you so weak now…? I can't figure it out."

"It is because of your inappropriate remarks… How cowardly must you be…? Even in Japan, you must have left scores of girls in tears…"

"Sorry, but I don't remember ever doing anything like that…"

She really was the daughter of a noble family, although it was hard to tell when she was being her violent self around Ouka. She wasn't used to more crude expressions, so even common, innocuous phrases came across as suggestive to her.

That was why she overreacted to phrases that were common during a workout, like "panting for breath" and "soaked with sweat," which left her wide open to attack each time.

"We may have no choice but to use our final option…" Sasara's eyes were dark.

Ryouta wasn't sure what this "final option" might be, but he could tell it would be extreme.

Fleeing the country? At least the security here is all over the place, so we could pull it off if we wanted to.

Japan lay beyond the borders of the Sacred Blood Empire, in all directions.

Escaping would probably be a lot easier than you might think. Coming into the country was possible with a little effort. Kiyomizu, Rei, and Ryouta himself had all managed it, anyhow.

No, that's no good. I can't throw Sasara's life off track.

He had no choice but to get stronger.

Even if Sasara wasn't well, he still needed her to train him.

"Oh, yeah, I was talking the whole time, wasn't I? Maybe I wasn't really putting my heart into it. This time I'll concentrate and keep quiet."

"Very well…"

They started practice again.

Ryouta was beaten to a pulp in a minute.

"Wait! Wait! Waaait!"

“No talking. You are much too vulnerable.”

Whack.

The moment they restarted practice in silence, Sasara’s real abilities shone through.

Maybe she’d forgotten this was supposed to be practice, and she was airing out all of her pent-up rage.

Ryouta couldn’t do anything. Whenever he tried to make a move, she had already struck him. The fight was already decided; it was simply a matter of time.

Has she gotten stronger since we last fought…? If we were fighting with real swords, she would’ve killed me five times over…

“Let each hit be your teacher!”

But Ryouta was slowly getting used to Sasara’s technique. His body was remembering.

His sword moved to block a strike before he could even think the move through consciously.

Yes! If I can keep practicing like this, I might be able to get at least a little better.

“Haaaah!” Sasara drew back for a thrust.

Earlier, he would have recoiled in fear—but then he’d only be giving full control of the battle to her. He would never win that way.

This is when I go on the attack!

Ryouta rushed toward Sasara. Here was when he’d take her down with a counter.

But in that moment, there was disturbance in the air.

“Huh?!” Sasara’s gaze was elsewhere entirely.

The broken tension caused Ryouta’s steps to falter, and he tripped. “Oh no…”

He fell forward, and the tip of his sword drove toward Sasara’s chest.

Worst case, he’d end up stabbing her in the stomach.

Sorry! Please dodge!

“I could step— Ah, but…”

Sasara stepped back to somehow dodge the blow, but she didn’t totally make it.

The wooden sword caught on Sasara’s *gi*.

“I’m so bored…”

Tuesday, after school, Shiren lay alone in her room with nothing to do.

She considered reading through a manga all in one sitting, but she didn’t have the energy.

“Hrrrm… I wonder why it’s so much more exciting to read manga during busy times, like before a test. I can’t get into it today…”

In the end, she abandoned her full three-volume read-through of *You’re Rouko, I’m Kouko!*

“It doesn’t really feel new or fresh. I mean, the new characters like Youko are great—it’s really fun to see a new take on the emotionally dishonest archetype. She says she only ever does things for herself, but she always ends up helping others. But the serialization itself is plateauing, so nothing really feels *new* anymore. I suppose that was inevitable, though…” Shiren sighed, playing with her pigtails. “The spin-off series *Burning? Burying? The First Emperor!* is going on sale soon, so I guess I just have to wait for that one…”

Burning? Burying? The First Emperor! was a manga by Kin Hayashimori. Its popularity was mainly due to the bizarre running joke about the main character executing someone in every chapter.

“Ryouta, find any obscure, but still interesting manga that both of us might enjoy? Even larger-copy prints, the more expensive ones are fine. It feels like I’ve read all the famous series. I miss that feeling of discovering a good new story all on my own. Everything I’ve read recently has been good—nothing has been a huge miss or anything—but I haven’t been blown away, either. No new talent. Don’t you think so, Ryouta? —Oh, that’s right. He’s not here today.”

Ryouta would usually offer a quip whenever she started getting annoying or snobby (“You sound like such a know-it-all” or “You’re just bad at picking out good stuff. If you’ve read all the stuff that’s out now, find some good older classics”), but today, he was gone. He’d come home from school, then immediately left to go train with Sasara.

“And of course Kiyomizu’s disappeared, too. She’s always gone when it counts…”

There was nothing for her to do. A high schooler should probably study, but she would never do that without outside pressure.

“Hrrrm… Maybe I’ll call Tamaki and go out with her. That sounds like a

good idea."

Shiren dialed the number on her cell, and Tamaki answered right away.

"Hey, Tamaki, if you're free today, why don't we—?"

*"*Sigh… *For some reason, the university student we hired to start shifts today at the store hasn't arrived… I called, but no answer… Father has been cross all day, complaining that we should've at least received some notice… But now I have no choice but to cover the shift… How can someone inconvenience others with no shame at all…? Would I be able to live a powerful life if I had that courage? Oh, how impertinent of me to imagine I could ever purposefully trouble someone else."*

"A-ah, that sounds rough…"

"But I decided I wanted to be stronger, more rebellious, so I started listening to hip-hop. That's the image I associate with it. But the random song I chose turned out to be about being forced to work for low wages, so it only made me more depressed… And the next thing I knew, I had written a rap for myself."

> "I wanna be strong, but I really just wanna cry
> This crappy retail job is bleeding me dry
> Can't see tomorrow through the fog of the grease
> My fake smile's cracking 'cause they keep me on a leash
> They don't pay me enough and I'm barely alive
> Selling porn and reading self-help just to survive
> Oh, every day, I wanna burn it down, but it's too pointless to scheme
> Oh, every day, I wanna wake up, but this isn't a dream
> Oh, every day, I wanna find myself, but I can only scream
> Yo, oh no… No end, no end, no end in sight…"

"Okay, enough! I get it! Please, just stop!"

"Oh! Kokoko, please don't eat the boxed lunches on sale! At least pick ones that are expired! Oh, a customer came in to use the bathroom and left without buying anything… Please at least buy a drink… Oh! A customer

that was reading Jump *just left… Please buy it. Now it's all bent… Oh! Oh! Kokoko, please don't eat just one of a two rice ball set! What, you just want the kombu rice balls? How awful…"*

"……"

"I'm sorry. That's why I don't think I can go anywhere."

"It's okay. Good luck with work."

She couldn't do anything about the situation, so Shiren hung up.

Nothing to do again.

She lay sprawled out on the couch.

Ryouta always scolded her for doing that because her pigtails would reach the floor, but he wasn't around.

"I wonder what he's doing now…?" she murmured quietly to herself, the words bubbling up from deep inside her. "*Sigh*…… I just realized—"

Just in case, she looked around, making sure Kiyomizu wasn't here.

"—I'm useless without Ryouta."

As the daughter of Sairi Fuyukura—rumored to be the murderer of the previous emperor—she had been treated with great caution in the past, but that was not the case anymore.

She had fun going to school, and she and Ouka were now close enough to have casual conversation as sisters.

But what made her genuinely enjoy her new life now was the fact that Ryouta was in it. Without him, her life would go back to the emotionally dull one it was before.

And she couldn't let that stand.

"I—I need to bond more deeply with Ryouta… We need to solidify our relationship as master and minion even more…"

She needed to get moving.

She changed out of her pajamas, put her shoes on, and went out without taking anything else with her.

She was going to Ryouta.

Watching his practice wasn't a crazy thing to do, and she needed something to calm herself down.

"And I just know he's going to jinx himself in some ridiculous way again… That's how he is, after all…"

She'd asked where they'd be practicing. It was a little far, but not too far for her to walk. And her mood would improve with the exercise more than

waiting for one of the few buses that went that way.

"Monitoring… No, *observing* a minion's hard work is the job of a master."

She didn't have to wait for many lights walking at a brisk pace, so it wasn't long before she had arrived at the old, essentially abandoned middle school where Sasara and Ryouta should be practicing.

But I don't want to embarrass myself by barging in… Maybe I'll just take a peek…

She tiptoed into the building, hearing the dry *thunks* of wood hitting wood.

When she peeked in, she could see both Ryouta and Sasara, their eyes brimming with fierce energy.

They're actually practicing quite seriously. Very good, very good.

Shiren could feel her nerves unwinding.

This is Ryouta we're talking about—I thought he would have fallen over with Sasara beneath him or something. I'm glad I was wrong.

There was precedent for incidents like that, so she was genuinely worried about it.

Ah, this won't be a problem at all. I should head home before they notice me.

But before she could do that, her and Sasara's eyes met briefly.

Sasara's lips parted slightly; she was apparently as shocked as Shiren.

Oh no! She saw me!

The atmosphere changed in a fraction of a second, inviting trouble again.

Ryouta fell over.

His wooden sword plunged into Sasara.

Had she been in top form, Sasara would have easily been able to dodge it. But her concentration was interrupted when she saw Shiren, so she couldn't move out of the way in time.

The tip of Ryouta's sword caught on her *gi*.

Vrrrrrt!

And Sasara's *gi* promptly ripped.

Instinctively, she pulled back and fell on her rear.

“That hurt… Oh, my chest feels so cold…”

“Sasara, are you okay? Oh…” Ryouta couldn’t find anything else to say.

Sasara’s *gi* had been pulled off the top half of her body…

“Wait, my *gi*… What?! Where is my *gi*?!”

Ryouta couldn’t actually see her chest, thanks to her bindings. But those were fairly ripped up, too, and the sweat made them somewhat translucent. He couldn’t see anything, but it was close.

In fact, the just-barely-there covering was even more salacious…

His eyes drifted toward her soft, pale shoulder.

I bet it’d melt if I touched it…, he thought before he could stop himself.

“D-don’t look at me like that… This was just an accident…” Embarrassed, Sasara used her left hand to cover her chest.

“You’re right, I’m sorry… The tension evaporated all of a sudden, so I just…fell over…”

“I know. You worked really hard to build your concentration, but then it vanished so suddenly. Did you not know what was going on behind you?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Can you not feel the malice?”

Ominous, Ryouta thought as he turned around.

There he saw a very angry-looking Shiren—and then two fingers in his eyes.

“Owwwwww! Why are you here, Shiren?! No, that doesn’t matter—ow!!” Ryouta flailed wildly. It was a critical hit.

“You tore Sasara’s clothes right off. I thought this *might* happen, but then it actually did… That certainly was close.”

“This whole thing was an accident… Wait, Sasara started acting that way because you came in, didn’t she?”

“What?! Are you blaming your own mistakes on your master?! Ugh, you are despicable!” Shiren immediately protested. But she knew he wasn’t totally off base, so her protests were mild at most.

“I’m not saying the whole thing is your fault, but…why did you come all the way here anyway?”

“Because I’m worried about you, Ryouta. Obviously.”

The atmosphere was getting a little weird again—although Shiren didn't notice it herself until she saw that Ryouta and Sasara were staring blankly at her.

"Oh, uh… Don't read too deeply into it! It's perfectly normal for a master to think about how her minion is doing! This is an inspection! An inspection! I'm not here because I miss him terribly or anything! I am not lying!"

"Okay, I get it… Just calm down…"

Shiren's face was red, which only made Ryouta blush, too. Now Sasara could see the how embarrassing they were together at home.

"Sorry, Sasara. You're probably so tired of all this…"

"Heh-heh… Hee-hee-hee." Sasara gave a quiet, delicate chuckle.

"Huh? Did it warm your heart that much?"

"You two truly go well together. Master and minion, completely in sync."

"You think so? Well, I suppose that means Ryouta's grown thanks to my discipline." Shiren arrogantly puffed out her chest.

"You should be the one growing. Both emotionally and phys—"

"Silence!" Her fingers went right into his eyes.

"Ow! Again… This is happening a lot today…"

A smile spread across Sasara's face—free of doubt, but a little sad, too.

"Well, the final option does seem viable, then."

"The final option? I don't like the sound of that…" Shiren's face clouded over. She didn't know what was going on, but she could tell it wouldn't be fun.

"No need to worry. After watching you two interact, I know it will not be a problem at all. If a problem were to arise, I can take responsibility," Sasara said, relieved.

But the way she phrased her reassurance only made Ryouta worry even more.

With an uneasy look, he swallowed.

"Now then, Ryouta Fuyukura, let us continue our training."

But Sasara was the only one whose eyes were clear.

TELL US, SASARA!

Q: Can you describe your love for Ouka in one word?

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EPISODE 3

LET'S INTERRUPT THE FORMAL MATCHMAKING SESSION!

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EPISODE 3

LET'S INTERRUPT THE FORMAL MATCHMAKING SESSION!

"You've grown quite skilled," Sasara called with a cheerful nod, finishing off the last training session before the fateful meeting.

Her face was flushed from practice, and her damp hair was somehow alluring.

"Yeah, I'd be really disappointed if I didn't improve after all that."

On the other hand, Ryouta was exhausted, on all fours on the tatami. He wouldn't be able to stand for a while.

"You have a knack for swordplay. If you continue, I am certain you will grow to be an excellent fighter in the future. I guarantee it."

Sasara's voice was bright.

Maybe she was thinking of him as her apprentice. There was no greater honor for a coach than to see someone under their guidance grow.

"But"—her expression immediately clouded over—"it's almost impossible for you to win against Masatsuna Toraha. Imagine a praying mantis versus a car. A mantis can have all the fighting spirit it wants; the car will simply flatten it."

"Yeah, I guess a superficial crash course wouldn't do anything…" He had been ready for this, but he still hated hearing the truth so plainly.

"But, Sasara, it's not like we don't have a chance. I'll do everything in my power."

If he bowed out now, she would be destined for a future she didn't want.

For a noble, it was difficult to choose a marriage partner with total freedom, but if Sasara hadn't accepted her fate, he couldn't do so easily either.

"Shiren was the same. She had just accepted her lot and decided she wasn't going to change. But if you give it a shot, you might be surprised at the results. I'm sure you—"

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Sasara replied with a kind smile. “There is a chance. But I will not force you to risk your life for a slim possibility. I will not be destroyed, after all.”

“But you can’t give up just yet. We still have time.”

“I have said nothing about giving up.” She quietly balled her right hand into a fist. “I will use our final option,” she said solemnly.

“What is that option anyway? Don’t do anything that would hurt yourself.” From the way she was refusing to tell him, Ryouta naturally imagined the worst.

“No need to worry. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“It’s making me really nervous… But it *is* just a day away, so I’ll wait.”

If he knew ahead of time, he might start overthinking and ruin everything. That was likely why she was keeping him in the dark; it wouldn’t be wise to worry him at this point.

“Well, I must return the key and start on other work. I shall be returning home now.”

“Sure, see you tomorrow.”

They parted ways, and Ryouta trudged home.

He was nervous, but they weren’t completely out of ideas, so this wasn’t a lost cause.

“She hasn’t said she’s given up, at least. It does kind of bother me that she won’t tell me what it’s all about though—”

His cell phone rang.

It was Alfoncina.

“Oh, Ryouta, is your practice finished? I want you to drop by the cathedral on your way home. I promise I won’t do anything weird~.”

“When you have to tell me you won’t do anything weird…”

“I made too much boiled taro, so I’ll give you some to take home. Come on over~.”

“All right. I’ll drop by.”

When he got to the cathedral, he dropped five sacred yen into the donation box.

Alfoncina didn’t typically appear unless one made a donation.

…

But this time she didn't appear at all.

"Huh, she should be in. Don't tell me…"

This time, he put in one hundred sacred yen.

No response.

"Huh, maybe she suddenly had an errand come up… Wait, no way…"

This time, he put in five hundred sacred yen.

Wham! The door to the main shrine flung open.

"Hi there, Ryouta! Come on in!"

"I shouldn't have to pay money when *you* ask me to come here!"

"Oh, no need to be so harsh. Only one coin is a small price to pay for what you're about to get~."

"That was not one coin! This cost me six hundred and ten sacred yen!"

"No need to be harsh~. This could easily cost thirty thousand sacred yen~."

"Wh-what are you going to do…?" Ryouta tensed slightly. "You're not going to take me somewhere and try to bite me, are you…?"

"No need to worry. I am serious today. See? I'm dressed differently."

Once she mentioned it, Ryouta realized her clothes were much fancier than her normal archbishop ones, and heavily accessorized.

"No sexy plans. I am not lying today."

"Today, huh? You could stop lying every other day, too!"

"Come in, now, and please sit down in the center here~."

A single cushion sat in the middle of the grand cathedral hall.

Right in front of it was a grandiose altar. The space was meant for rituals, by his guess.

Ryouta did as he was told and sat. "Okay, but what are you—?"

"Here we go!"

Alfoncina took a deep breath.

> "Haaah, yamyamyamyam, yunyunyunyun, hyohyohyohyo, kyukyukyukyu, monmonmonmon, haaaah~.♪"

"Why are you singing in tongues?! Are you contacting aliens or something?!"

Alfoncina's melody was very strange indeed.

She started dancing in circles around Ryouta, waving a staff decorated with pleated streams of paper, like what a Shinto priest at a shrine would use.

> "Hanhanhanhan, rurururu, sumsumsumsum, haaaaaah~.♪"

"This might be the creepiest thing I've ever seen! Is this some recent trend or something?!"

"Shut up," Alfoncina said to him, her face more terrifying than any she'd ever made in front of him before. Her voice was filled with the dignity of an elder. She wasn't playing around. "This won't take long, so sit still."

"O-okay… I'm sorry…"

—The weird song went on for five minutes.

> "Haaaah~. Ryouta Fuyukura~.♪ Yumyum, sunsun, heniheni, chanchan, hiruhiru, panopano, haeeeeeee!"

Alfoncina froze in a sort of pose.

"I'm done. *Huff, puff*... Whenever I do this, I lose about two pounds… Maybe I'll put some mayonnaise on my lunch today…"

Alfoncina limply slumped to the floor, but her legs folded beneath her in an almost coquettish way.

"Was it really that much work? That was a long dance… Good job…"

"You should now have the Goddess of Blood's protection, Ryouta." Alfoncina's expression immediately brightened.

"What was that, anyway…?"

It didn't seem like a joke, but he still didn't understand what exactly had happened.

"I was praying for you, Ryouta. You seem to be in some danger this time~."

"Danger? What do you—?"

"You've crossed many dangerous bridges so far, Ryouta. You've always been lucky in the end, but you never know when your luck will run out."

"Uh-oh, this sounds way more serious than I imagined!"

She came to sit beside Ryouta and stared at him. “This is because you’re greedy, Ryouta.”

“Greedy? I don’t think I want a lot of stuff…?”

“You can only share the burdens of so many people in life. You’d be all right just with Shiren, but when you add Ouka and Tamaki, the weight may become too much to bear. And now Sasara. Don’t you think you’re approaching your limit?”

“Burdens? I’m just helping out my classmates… I don’t really have other motives…”

“Yes. It’s most dangerous when you’re unaware. To be honest, I had no idea we would reach this point.”

Alfoncina appeared to be treating Ryouta as a big problem.

“But I did all I can. There is no more I can do for you as the archbishop.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry to have caused you all this trouble…”

“Well, besides the more erotic things.”

“No, thank you! Seriously!”

Alfoncina had bit him once, almost turning him into her minion, which would have prevented him from going home forever. Alfoncina was serious when it came to this.

“I’ll leave the rest of the prayers to Kiyomizu~.”

“What? Kiyomizu?”

The next moment, someone hugged him from behind.

“Ryouta, dearest! You keep making bad connections lately! I’m the only one you need!”

“Oh, Kiyomizu. Could you just let me—?”

“You will most certainly find yourself in danger, Ryouta dearest! Which means I will purify you with my sutras! I will use the Kannon Sutra that is a part of the Lotus Sutra!

Seesonmyousoguu, gaakonjumonpii,
busshiigaainnen, myouiikanzeeon,
guusokumyousouson, geetoumuujinnii,
nyoochoukannongyou, zennoushoohoushoo.”

“You’re way serious about this! You’re not joking, are you?!”

“Of course! I will always genuinely love you, Ryouta dearest! I want you to understand that in this life, and not end up in nirvana!”

After hearing several of Kiyomizu’s sutras, Ryouta went home.

“I’m back~. I’ll start making dinner right away, so just hang on.”

“Ugh! Ryouta, you reek of incense… What happened?” Shiren immediately asked. “Did you go to somebody’s funeral…?”

“Could you stop inviting bad luck talking about these things?”

The people at the cathedral had been really worried about him, which in turn had shaken his confidence even further.

Kiyomizu had told him the sutra was a blessing to get him out of most trouble—which meant both she and Alfoncina were assuming that trouble was on the way. Did they have some kind of clairvoyant abilities…?

I hope I’ll be okay tomorrow… I hope nothing happens… Well, those prayers were to protect me, so I should be fine…

Shiren closed the manga she was reading and then took Ryouta’s hand.

“Wh-what is it, Shiren?”

“Ryouta, let me just say one thing about the meeting tomorrow.”

“O-okay… I’ll make sure not to die…”

“Obviously; don’t invite more trouble… I just don’t want you to forget…” Shiren’s grip tightened around his hand.

“Forget what?”

“That you’re my minion. Don’t go marrying other girls without my permission.”

“Well, of course not. The whole point is to ruin Sasara’s meeting. I’m not going there to marry her… If she ended up marrying me instead of her cousin, we’d be right back where we started.”

“That’s fine. You do tend to throw yourself into danger without a second thought when you see someone in trouble, though… I admire your servile spirit, but it shouldn’t be too much…”

“I know. I’ll be fine,” Ryouta promised, meeting Shiren’s eyes directly.

His only intention was to give his master some peace of mind. *Still, this is kind of embarrassing… We’re even holding hands…*

“Yes. I believe you, Ryouta.” Shiren answered her minion with a smile of trust. And then her face flushed red. “So…to seal it in stone…could you

let me drink a little— No, never mind!" Shiren shook her head. "I can't do that. It is shameful for a master to test her minion. I have to trust you!"

"Uh…Shiren, is something wrong?" Ryouta could tell there was.

"Don't worry about it! Go crash the matchmaking meeting! Y-you should go to bed early so you're ready for tomorrow! I'm not going to bite you in the morning, either!"

"Thanks…"

Her consideration only made Ryouta more uneasy.

I really hope nothing happens tomorrow…

Then came the day of the meeting.

Ryouta was in the Nine-to-Eleven convenience store, where he would be meeting Sasara.

He'd never been to her house before, so he wasn't exactly sure where it was. Or maybe she lived somewhere in the castle?

He was dressed differently from his usual—a morning suit with his sword at his waist. He'd decided to dress up, in case a T-shirt was uncouth, and equipped himself in case he did need to fight. And also to convince everyone that he was also in the emperor's personal guard.

"Sasara still hasn't showed up. I'm sorry, Shijou. I'll still be waiting here for a bit," he said to Tamaki, who was working as the store clerk.

"Of course. You're free to make yourself at home, Ryouta. You may pick your nose and I will say nothing at all."

"I'm not gonna do that."

"You may even take a look at the adult-only stand."

"I really don't need preferential treatment!"

"But all the pornography is taped shut, so you can't read it anyway, right?"

"I don't know anything about that at all! I don't even know what to say to that! I'll read magazines for kids my age or whatever instead!"

"Oh, are you more turned on by the fan service in teen comics?"

"Can we stop talking about this?! I shouldn't be reading them for free anyway, so I'll go look at the snacks!" And in the snack aisle he found a familiar face.

"You buying something?"

“Oh, hey, Kokoko. Nice to see you actually working.”

The bunny-eared girl came to stand beside him. Despite the shape of her ears, her name meant *fox-fox-girl*, and she was the daughter of a god enshrined in one of the mountains in the Empire. She used to shoplift from the Nine-to-Eleven, and now she was employed there.

“I’m not sure. Do you recommend anything?”

“These The-Ramen-Shop-Everyone-Lines-Up-For–flavored chips are pretty good. *Crunch, crunch.*”

“Ramen shop flavor? What kind of ramen? *Crunch, crunch.* Hey, these are pretty tasty.”

“Right? *Crunch, crunch.* I like the 9 Little Chocolates, too. Nine balls of chocolate in a compact—perfect for short trips. *Nom.* Try one.”

“*Nom.* Yeah—sweet, but not too sweet. I think they’d be great to take along on the Shinkansen. Oh, but you don’t have the Shinkansen in this country— Huh?”

It was just now that Ryouta realized that she’d taken the chips and chocolate from the shelves.

“Hey! You opened them before paying for them!”

“This plum gum wakes you right up, too. *Chew, chew.*”

“You’re opening them all! Are you allowed to give out free samples?!”

All the snacks around him had been opened, like at a club meeting when no one wanted to do anything.

“Kokoko, please do not open the goods! I have a snack for you!” Tamaki cried from the counter.

“You just don’t understand. I like it best when I eat what I want, when I want. I’m thirsty now, so I’m gonna grab a drink.”

“Wait, wait.”

Before she could add another crime to her rap sheet, Ryouta grabbed her ears. Bunny ears were extremely convenient for grabbing.

“Let me go! My ears are not handles!” She wriggled in protest, but she wasn’t strong enough to wriggle away.

“Listen. The reason you’re working at this store at all is because you caused them problems. Take this seriously. You may have bunny ears, but you still have to follow human rules.”

“No! I’m a fox! I’m not a bunny! You’re making me hopping mad!”

“Don’t make bunny puns! It sounds really forced!”

“Waaah! Why won’t you accept that I’m a fox?!” Kokoko burst into tears.

Since she was a kid, once the floodgates were open, they wouldn’t be stopping anytime soon. Ryouta was beginning to suspect he should have left well enough alone.

“C’mon, this isn’t something to cry over…”

Deciding he shouldn’t keep her restrained while she was crying, he let her go.

Kokoko rushed straight toward Tamaki. “Sis Tamaki, he’s bullying me!” she cried, hugging Tamaki tightly.

“No, I wasn’t bullying—”

“He’s a bully! He told me that *abura-age* is just made from the dregs of the tofu-making process and that it’s a crappy thing to eat!”

“One, that’s a really rude thing to say, and two, I didn’t even say it!”

“Listen, there’s a restaurant in Sakai, Fukui that offers *abura-age* steak! The highest quality *abura-age* has the rich umami that comes from soybeans and an irresistibly crisp texture, and it’s really good if you put some grated daikon and a special sauce just for the steak on top! There’s also something called a fox burger in Toyokawa, Aichi, which is renowned for its inari-zushi and Toyokawa inari—”

“Okay, okay, I get it, you love *abura-age*, enough with the trivia!”

Her depth of knowledge in the fried tofu dish only emphasized her identity as a fox.

“Oh my. But you are at fault here, too, Kokoko, so you need to think about what you did,” Tamaki warned her.

“But according to the teachings of monks Hounen and Shinran, even the worst people can be saved by praying to Amida Buddha! So I’m fine the way I am!”

“Agh! She acts like a kid, but she knows just enough to be weirdly difficult!”

“Some consider the belief that doing good things alone will give you salvation to be like testing the gods and Buddha, even a form of blasphemy, so I think just mindlessly praying to be saved is way better!”

“Don’t tell me you’re just pretending to be a kid and you’re actually super-duper wise? I really don’t understand your character!”

She did have divine blood in her, so maybe she had a longer life span.

Maybe she even had some omnipotence or omniscience. But Ryouta had only seen her a few times, so he wasn't sure about that.

"But please do try not to do it again, Kokoko." Tamaki gently patted Kokoko's head.

"Okay, Sis Tamaki… I'm sorry."

She seemed attached to Tamaki. And Tamaki was a good big sister.

"Business has been doing a bit better since Kokoko came, and it's been fun."

"I'm glad to hear that. You kept talking about how the store was about to go under."

"Yes. Simply talking about the hardship doesn't change anything—I read that in a self-help book once. Instead, you can invite happiness by talking about how happy you already are. That's why no matter how bad things get, I can avoid the pain just by insisting that I am not in pain. I will be happy if I insist that I am happy. I am happy. I am happy!"

"I…don't think that's right, but I dunno…"

But he couldn't reject her happiness, so he ignored her. He turned the topic back to Kokoko.

"If business is doing well, then you must really be a god, Kokoko. You brought in good luck."

"Sure am. I'm super important, so be nicer to me. I don't have power over luck, but I can generally tell if someone is going to be happy or not in the future. I'm making sure Sis Tamaki won't be too unhappy."

"Huh, that's an interesting power."

"So listen, Sis Tamaki." Kokoko pointed at Ryouta. "Don't get close to him. His unhappiness will rub off on you," she declared.

"What? Why, Ryouta? He should be much happier than me!"

"Yeah, that's right! Don't be rude!" Ryouta added.

"Indeed… You could not acknowledge the possibility you would ever be unhappier than me… No person could ever find more woe than a girl like me…"

"No, Shijou, that's not what I mean! I just got mad when she acted like I was contagious…"

Conversations got complicated whenever Tamaki was around.

"Kokoko… I bet you still hold a grudge, don't you?"

"I'm not lying. This guy's going to get neck-deep in some major

misfortune. He might even get himself killed. It's probably best you don't associate with him."

"Y'know, there are some things you shouldn't say…" But Ryouta was stumbling over his words—he knew what she was talking about.

Alfoncina and Kiyomizu were super worried about me… Just give me a break…

The entrance chime sounded.

"I am sorry I'm late, Ryouta Fuyukura." Sasara entered the store.

"Oh, morning, Sasara. Let's get goi—"

Ryouta's eyes widened.

Sasara was wearing a frilly dress that was no embarrassment at all, perfectly fitting for a noble young lady.

Where do they sell clothes like these? It looks like a stage costume…and yet it's scarily perfect on her.

You would never guess she was a swordswoman at all. Right now, she was a well-bred young noblewoman. It was almost impossible for him to think that she'd ever lifted anything heavier than a fork in her life…

"Why have you fallen silent? Is my dress so bizarre?"

"N-no, that's not it at all…"

Even Tamaki and Kokoko were enraptured by the sight.

So this is what noble blood is like… Those clothes look so good on her, like she was born to wear them…

"Shall we be going, then? I have the car waiting in the parking lot."

"The car? You don't have a license, do you?"

Sasara gawked at him. "Why would I drive? I have a chauffeur. They are nice to have, so I suggest you hire one for your household."

"Spoken like one who has no idea about the Fuyukura finances…"

"Ahh, a personal chauffeur…," Tamaki cooed. "That is what makes the rich different from everyone else. It's beyond my means to even imagine such a thing. I should embrace my fate as a convenience store clerk and the joys that life brings. I shouldn't be hoping for any more than that…"

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“Sis Tamaki, these snacks are great. You can find happiness just by eating something yummy. Cheer up.”

It was Kokoko who ended up comforting her despondent coworker.

“Have I done something wrong…? Anyway, we must go. Farewell, Shijou.”

“Oh yeah, we need to go! See ya later, you two!”

In the parking lot was a black car that was probably way more expensive than Ryouta could ever imagine.

“I was originally thinking about sending the car to your house, but you live on castle grounds. Even if it’s only the gardens, it would still be disrespectful to send a car in.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess so…”

As the chauffeur drove smoothly along, Ryouta took in the scenery outside and inside the car. This wasn’t just a luxury vehicle; it was an expression for a noble’s peculiar interests. The thing was covered with custom designs—maybe rococo or something.

“We’re going to a noble manor…”

Even though Ouka had once given him a tour of the castle, he felt a different kind of nervousness.

“No need to be so tense. Bloodlines do matter to my family, but I doubt they will discriminate against you simply because you are a commoner. More importantly, you are one of the emperor’s personal guard, which legally makes you a noble.”

“Most real nobles probably wouldn’t want to acknowledge a noble by technicality, though…”

He would need to project confidence, he knew, but he still couldn’t find peace of mind.

“By the way, is the Toraha family a branch of the Tatsunami family or something?” Ryouta still wasn’t sure what kind of position her cousin held.

“No. They were originally an independent family, until my father’s younger sister—my aunt—married into the Torahas. A good majority of the noble families moved here after the Empire was established, but the Toraha family has lived here for generations.”

“I see. So now that your cousin’s really strong, he has to get married?”

“He will be treated as a groom marrying into my family. The Toraha family has plenty of boys, so they are not concerned with succession. They are fully capable of protecting their family line.”

This was a very “blue blood” kind of conversation, which made Ryouta feel small.

The car continued north and out of the downtown area, and the view changed into something more pastoral. They then turned west and entered the mountains.

“Wait, you’re coming to school from all the way out here…? We’re already more than three miles away from the castle…”

“Yes, and that’s nothing in a car.”

“But should one of the emperor’s personal guard live so far away?”

“I stay in the castle on days I have night duty, but it is not wartime. I commute from my territory.”

“Wow, your ‘territory’… I feel like I’m back in the old times…” Finally, a large mansion at the top of a small hill came into view. “That’s more of a castle than a manor.”

“Indeed. It is built to be safe and defensible if the time calls for it.”

The car stopped just inside the large gate, before what Ryouta assumed was the main building. Before they could enter, however, a gentleman with a magnificent beard and a kind-looking woman came out to greet them.

“Ah, so you are the candidate,” said the man.

“My, thank you for coming out all this way,” said the woman, who reminded Ryouta of Sasara.

“This is my father Maxwell, and my mother Elsa.”

“Oh, hello,” said Ryouta. “I’m honored to be a classmate of Tatsunami’s.”

Ryouta hurriedly bowed to them. He was easily flustered in these situations; his only experience with nobility was Sasara and Ouka, and they barely counted.

“No need to humble yourself. This is all to see if you are stronger than the man we’ve arranged. That is all.”

Whoa, so strength really is all that matters here…

Even though he wore the sword that Ouka had given him to display his noble status, he was still unsettled by the idea of fighting with it. This was a real sword, so winning would mean wounding his opponent.

“Then I shall be going into the manor. Ry…Ryouta, please go ahead to the meeting spot…”

“Y-you called me—? Oh, right…”

The sudden shift to his first name left him taken aback, but she couldn’t exactly call the man she supposedly wanted by his full name.

I bet she really hates this… Her face is all red… She must be so embarrassed…

He couldn’t just keep staring at her face, so he quickly made his way to the annex, which was a Japanese-style building with a tiled roof.

Inside, there was a long table sitting in the tatami room.

“I guess the matchmaking meeting is going to be Japanese-style. The Sacred Blood sure like to mix cultu—”

“Who’re you?” someone asked warily.

Ryouta saw a boy with a sharp gaze, sitting there alone. His hair was long, definitely long enough to tie back. He seemed to be just a bit younger than Ryouta.

Wait, did Sasara have a younger brother…? She’s never mentioned him.

The boy also had a katana sheath sitting on his belt.

“You’re not…Toraha, are you?”

“I am indeed Masatsuna Toraha. Who are you? My apologies, I’m about to have a matchmaking meeting here, so could you leave?”

“No, Sasara told me to come here…” After all, if a member of the family wanted him to be here, there should be no problem, right?

“What?! *What?!* How rude of you!!!!!” Toraha took several steps back with a look of extreme shock, as if he’d just stumbled across a murder.

“Rude? About what? Oh, you’re a noble, right? I’m Ryouta Fuyukura, the lowest of lowest nobles.”

“No, I don’t care about that! How dare you address Lady Sasara by her first name?! And without her proper title, no less?!”

“Oh, right. She’s my classmate… Wait, let me correct myself. *Lady* Sasara’s my classmate.”

“You call her by her first name simply because she is your classmate…?”

“Ah, you’ve got a point… Uh, Lady *Tatsunami* is my classmate. Ugh, that doesn’t feel right…”

“Honestly, children these days… I cannot believe this…”

“I’m pretty sure we’re the same age.”

If anything, Ryouta was getting the impression this kid was one or two years younger than him.

“When I was a child, the rule was that once children reached seven years of age, boys and girls were no longer permitted to sit with one another. The boys were on the right side, and girls were on the left. We were not allowed to play with each other.”

“Hold on! What year is this?!”

“It was such hard work fetching water from the well in winter, splitting firewood…”

“When were you born?!”

“But the fried potatoes we would eat by the brazier were delicious. The snacks of long ago were all potatoes.”

“Who cares about the era—your past doesn’t sound noble at all!”

He couldn’t imagine a noble family living like that.

“The virtues of the Toraha family are austerity and fortitude. Plus, status and money are separate things.”

“Now that you mention it, you’re right.”

“We do have our fair share of assets, but the majority of it is land. Mountains and forests alone do not bring money. Yet it is the inheritance of our forebears, a precious gift, so we have no intention of letting it go.”

So despite their status, they weren’t exactly loaded with cash.

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Ryouta's phone beeped.

> TITLE: To Ryouta
> MESSAGE: Dearest Ryouta, I believe the matchmaking meeting is underway right about now. Even if the worst happens, do not worry. Do not forget about me during the meeting. That is why I am sending you my **N U D E S** with th—

Just Kiyomizu. Ryouta deleted it immediately.

"Better put my phone on silent. I don't want it ringing during the meeting."

"Aaaaaagh! What is that?!?!?!?!" Toraha pulled back.

"Hmm? What are you so scared of?"

"Is that a m-m-m-mobile, portable telephone?!"

"I've never heard it called that before. You can just call it a cell phone."

"A-are you not scared of using something so high-tech…?"

"No? What's to be afraid of?"

So not only was Toraha's lifestyle a few centuries out of date, but so was his understanding of technology.

"Kids these days have so much right at their fingertips like personal computers and televisions. How fun it must be to have all that…"

"I just said, you're a kid, too! We're the same generation!"

"But we finally have a lay-ser desk at home!"

Was he trying to say *LaserDisc*? "I'm pretty sure they don't produce LDs anymore. And don't you have a TV?"

"All we had to play with in my day was milk caps. Everyone got together outside the corner candy store to play."

Ryouta decided he wasn't going to complain anymore. This was all tiring him out…

"Well, forget about my memories. I need to live in the future." Toraha's face tensed. He was a good-looking guy, despite the quirks, and there was an air about him that Ryouta would expect from a powerful swordsman.

Some prominent athletes projected a level of maturity that made them seem much older than they actually were, and Toraha reminded Ryouta of them. The amount of experience he had was on a different level from the

other people his age.

"I will be having a matchmaking meeting with my cousin Lady Sasara soon. My future wife may be chosen today. That is all I want to focus on."

Hmm, maybe I shouldn't say this for Sasara's sake, but they do make a good match…

They were both good-looking, and even if he was a little weird, Toraha appeared to be a decent person.

But Sasara was not happy with this, and so they had to do something about it. Nobody should be forced into a wedding just because the guy was good-looking.

"By the way, why are you even here in—?"

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting." Sasara slowly entered the room, followed by her mother and father.

It was less of a marriage meeting and more of a husband screening for the Tatsunami family.

"It has been quite a long while, Masatsuna. I cannot believe we would meet again in a situation such as—"

"Aaaaaah!" Toraha suddenly dove under the table.

Ryouta thought for a second there was an earthquake, but Toraha was just shaking. And not from the excitement of battle, either.

"Hey, what are you so scared of?!"

"I'm terrified…to see Lady Sasara's beautiful face with my own eyes…"

That was quite a reason.

"You're not looking into the sun or anything. You're fine."

"Imbecile! Do you understand what a foolish thing it is you've said?! Do no thoughts pass through your mind when you gaze upon Lady Sasara?! The goddess of beauty stands right there!"

"Okay, but it's still weird that you're under the table."

"Even her dress is magnificent. What fashion sense! A vivaciousness befitting a young lady!"

"Literally nobody your age talks like this."

"Um… Masatsuna, I am not going to do anything, so please get out from under the table."

Ryouta wasn't surprised to hear the disgust in Sasara's voice.

"O-oh, all right…" Toraha finally emerged from under the table, but he

still couldn't look right at Sasara. "Ohhh… Lady Sasara is so beautiful, I am terrified to look at her… We may be no more than cousins, but it is the highest honor to have a matchmaking meeting…to possibly marry her in the future… I am so happy I may pass from this earthly realm at any moment…"

His reaction kind of reminds me of how Sasara acts toward Ouka…

One thing he knew: Toraha was totally smitten with her.

"Ha-ha-ha, you haven't changed at all, Masatsuna."

"Indeed. How happy Sasara must be."

Sasara's parents seemed to treat this like a normal heartwarming scene, but Ryouta was cringing at the melodrama.

"Now, you two, we will begin the meeting. You may already know each other well, but…" Sasara's dad was getting ready to move the meeting along.

"You are the only representative of the Toraha family here, Masatsuna, and this does not feel very formal at all. I have a general idea of who you are," said Sasara.

"I know you are not very enthusiastic about this, Sasara, which is why you brought this boy, didn't you?" her father replied knowingly. "I have heard that Fuyukura is a member of the emperor's personal guard. If you wanted to call off this meeting, it was not a bad card to play."

"I see you have me figured out. You are correct…"

"But what we need in the heir of the Tatsunami family is *this*," Sasara's dad flexed. "So if you can prove to us that you are stronger than Masatsuna, then so much the better. And, Masatsuna, you will gracefully stand down if you lose. Do you understand?"

"I see, so that's why you've come." Toraha seemed to be satisfied with this answer. "But if I stand down, my wedding with Lady Sasara would never happen… No, I am painfully aware that Lady Sasara and I are nothing alike. We are the sun and dust—I would be able to process my loss. It wouldn't bother me at all. Yes, I know all of this already. Oh no, my eyes are sweating."

Yeah, he and Sasara are way alike…, Ryouta thought. It ran in the family.

"But I have no objections to settling this with a match," Toraha said, his voice powerful. "Weak men have no right to be Lady Sasara's groom. I

would not lose anyway."

Well, well… I guess that makes sense, thinking about experience.

Toraha turned to glare right at Ryouta. "I have fought the perils of the Dark Martial Arts Tournament and the Door to the Samurai World and the Samurai World Unification tournaments. You are nothing."

"You really *did* fight in those!"

The names were outlandish, but apparently those were real tournaments he'd fought in.

"I'm ready. All miscreants who dare approach Lady Sasara will fall by my sword." Toraha placed a hand at his sheath, ready to draw at any moment.

"Oh, Masatsuna, I'm not going to ask you to go easy on him, but make sure not to hurt Sasara's classmate too badly. We're glad he even came out here for her sake. We had believed Sasara was moaning about Ouka at school, too, and that she didn't have any friends."

"Oh, she does moa— I mean, nothing."

It was a nice thing to hear from Sasara's dad, but he didn't seem to think a novice like Ryouta could win.

"I know. Bullying the weak is not a warrior's way. But he will be using a real sword, too. I cannot tell the future, but I may end up hurting him badly."

Nothing for it, but to do it. Ryouta made up his mind.

"If my friend doesn't want to get married, I'm obligated to put a stop to it." Ryouta placed a hand on his sword.

"F-friend…?!" Sasara screeched.

"Well, yeah… That's what I thought we were…" Ryouta was flustered; why did she react so strongly to that?

Maybe she hated even being called his friend. Given how much danger he was putting himself in, that was a little disheartening.

"Pardon me… I have never heard anyone say that out loud about me before…"

"I mean, probably not… I'd be super weirded out if someone came up to me every day to say that we're friends."

Toraha exited to the garden, still barefoot. It seemed he was that kind of person. "Come. We will settle this in ten seconds."

No way but forward. If Ryouta backed out now, he'd never be able to

show his face to anyone ever again.

"All right. We'll just have to do this fair and square." Just as Ryouta was about to step down from the veranda—

"I'll have to use the final option."

He could just barely hear Sasara's words.

That's right, she had something else prepared for this. He wasn't sure what it was, but he appreciated any help he could get.

"Mother! Father! Please listen!" Sasara proclaimed, her voice strained. "There was never any need for this meeting or for this match. It is all too late anyway."

"Hmm? Too late? What do you mean by that, Sasara?" her father asked.

Ryouta couldn't exactly ignore that, either.

Don't tell me she's terminally ill with months to live or something…

"I have sucked Ryouta's blood! Our relationship has already been consummated!"

Something exploded; Ryouta could feel it.

He wondered if this is what it felt like when Pandora's box was opened. This was most certainly the final option. He had no idea the air would change so drastically.

Thunk-pdunk went Toraha's sword as it slipped from his hand. "K-kids these days…"

He had nothing else to say, apparently. He'd basically been reduced to ash.

"What?! What is the meaning of this, Sasara?! How could you do such a thing without telling us!"

Sasara's dad was furious. Even if Toraha didn't kill Ryouta, Sasara's dad might finish the job instead…

"There is a reason for this! Mother, Father, do you remember when I was seriously injured?"

"Yes, of course."

"That was such a shock…"

"Back then, I took Ryouta's blood and escaped death. Had he not been there, I most certainly would not be standing before you now."

What Sasara said was basically the truth, so there was nothing he could say.

"R-Ryouta…thank you for what you did then." She clung to his arm like a child declaring something was hers.

"H-hey… That's too much…"

Even though this was part of the strategy, he had never expected her to take it this far.

"I know I'll be in your care…forever…"

"Honey, I don't think there's much we can do about this." Sasara's mom was giving in.

"You're right… It's already happened, so this really isn't the time to be having this meeting… But, hmm… Hrrrm…"

Sasara's dad still seemed unconvinced. His beard was wiggling.

"If you don't agree, then we will have to settle this in battle," Sasara's mom coolly declared. "When husband and wife disagree, it is the weaker that obeys the stronger—that is the rule of our family. I shall fetch the katana."

"Fine, fine! I accept, I accept!"

So Sasara's mom held more power in their relationship, and she wasn't afraid to wield it.

"*Ahem…* Which means that I ask you, Masatsuna, to let Sasara go. I'm certain you'll find another nice girl out there."

Toraha immediately burst into tears. The news must've really hit hard. "She's only a high school student… I can't stand these kids!!"

That was the last thing he said before turning to run away.

"Hey! Where're your shoes?!"

"I was barefoot when we were playing tag and where's-the-shoe! I don't need them!"

"Where's-the-shoe?! What kind of game is that?!"

Without any further explanation, Toraha left the scene.

I didn't have to fight after all… But I don't think this is the end.

The meeting ended without any injuries to Ryouta, but he had a feeling that he was now expected to do something much more dramatic.

"All right. I give you my blessing as Sasara's fiancé."

"Thank you… What?!"

"Sasara has never told us of any casual relationships. I doubt you've

even gone on a date, have you?”

“No, we haven’t…”

“You ought to know each other better. Go out together sometime next week. You’ll be married in the future, after all…”

“Uhhh, well…”

Sasara’s dad placed a hand on Ryouta’s shoulder—and his fingers tightened into a grip.

“You wouldn’t go through all the trouble of making her suck your blood and then back out now, would you? I want you to show her your good faith. That’s all I ask. Can you do that? Of course you can. You will. Capisce?”

“A-all right.” He couldn’t refuse that kind of offer.

“Then next Sunday, shall we go on a d-d-date?” Sasara suggested as she tripped over her words.

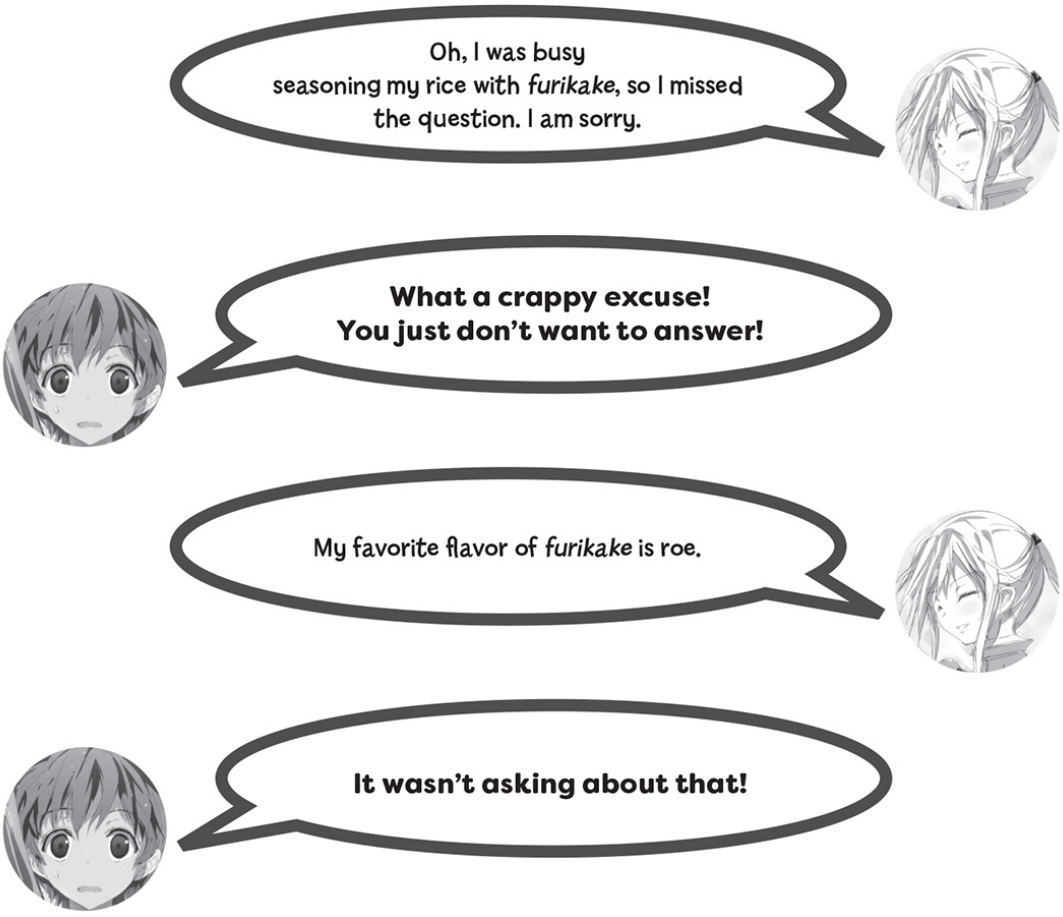
“Y-y-y-y-yeah, let’s do that…”

So this was the trade-off for the final option…

Ryouta had fallen into a quagmire, and he was sinking.

TELL US, SASARA!

Q: Be honest. How do you feel about Masatsuna Toraha?



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EPISODE 4

LET'S GO ON A DATE IN THE EMPIRE!

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EPISODE 4

LET'S GO ON A DATE IN THE EMPIRE!

"—And so, we'll be going on a date next week," Ryouta announced after returning home from the Tatsunami manor.

Neither girl listening to this news was impressed. The first was Shiren, while the other was Ouka, who had come to hang out.

"Tell me whose minion you're supposed to be, Ryouta. Nice and loud."

"I'm…Shiren's minion…"

"You certainly are! And *yet* you're going on a date with another Sacred Blooded! This is a grave act of treachery against your master!" Shiren was so angry, her pigtails were almost standing on end and steam was nearly coming out of her ears.

"I'm telling you, there's a *reason*… You have no idea how bad it can get if Sasara and I aren't on good terms…"

"Ha! Save your excuses! Yes, I allowed you to take on a temp job with Tamaki. Even if you wanted to be alone together, you were still working and performing your duties. But this is different!" Shiren's voice was beginning to break; she was close to tears. "This is a *date*, no question about it! You're going on a date with another girl without your master's permission… That's so…weird! And unfair!"

Shiren pounded Ryouta with her fists, and he felt so guilty about the whole situation that he let her.

"You're so stupid, Ryouta! Stupid, stupid!"

"Sorry, I didn't play my cards right at all…"

"Your master's face didn't play her cards right!"

"You know you're insulting yourself, don't you?"

"Shut up! You're the bad minion that rebelled!"

"Sorry… I'll be more careful in the future…"

"I wanna go on a date with you, too!"

Ryouta had no snarky retort for that. That was the last thing he'd

expected to hear.

"Oh… What I mean is…you're not supposed to go over your master's head for a date… I didn't mean that *I* wanna go on a date with you, but I guess that's what I said… That's, uh, well, just forget it!" Shiren's face went red as she stepped back. She was done smacking him for the time being.

It was now her sister's turn.

"You honestly have no principles, Ryouta. You almost make me think that you're operating on animal instinct alone. Are you even human?" Ouka was not pulling her punches.

"I know it was bad, but I don't think it makes me inhuman!"

"Why do you even need to go on a date with Sasara? Your official wedding would be far in the future, so you could have said you would court her while you were still in school. That would have tricked them easily."

"Well…that's a good point, but you've gotta think about how things might've played out…"

Would any guy have turned down Sasara after all she said?

When she asked, "Shall we go on a date?" the answer was a nod and a yes.

See, Sasara's right smack between cute and gorgeous, or the best of both worlds at least…

He hadn't noticed it since she was always moaning over Ouka, but if he took a step back to look at her, he saw a perfectly normal, beautiful young lady.

"Ugh, you're rationalizing right now, aren't you…? Unbelievable. This is why we always have such a hard time with you."

"Oops… You were right on the mark, so I can't say anything…"

Ouka's insight was sharp as always.

"Wait. What do you mean by me giving you a hard time? You're not really a part of this whole incident, are you?"

Ouka wavered for a brief second. *Oh crap*, was written across her face. "Well… If you've promised a date to someone without your master's permission, you're essentially ignoring the master-minion system. That's technically rebellion, and I am the ultimate authority of the Empire, which means I have a responsibility to address such an evil act, which is giving me a hard time. You see?"

"That explanation sounds kind of forced…"

“I’m raising taxes.”

“Don’t flash taxes whenever something doesn’t go your way!”

“I use these taxes for the less fortunate.”

“Stop trying to make me into the bad guy!”

“I shall supply them with figurines and body pillows and bath posters.”

“Wait, less fortunate how? At least choose a story and stick to it!”

“I’ll limit it to two sets per person when it goes on sale.”

“You just said you’d give it away, but now you’re selling?!”

“All right, enough jokes.” Ouka was genuinely upset—which was incredibly rare for her.

Ryouta thought all the way back to elementary school, and he still couldn’t remember ever seeing this expression on her face.

“This whole incident has me realizing how lenient I’ve been… The idiom about a snake in the grass comes to mind… I’ve been bitten by my own dog…”

“Your dog? You mean Sasara?”

“I let my guard down because I believed she would only ever look at me… I underestimated your power, Ryouta…”

“My power? No, the curse shouldn’t affect the Sacred Blooded.”

Ryouta’s very unattractive grandfather had cursed his grandson to be unusually attractive to humans of the opposite sex. But only humans, which was why he could live in relative peace in the Empire. In exchange, he wore a collar around his neck to show that he was Shiren’s minion. Otherwise, other Sacred Blooded people might start targeting him for his blood.

He had a feeling he was constantly getting involved in some form of violence. Or maybe that was just his imagination.

“This is what happens when I let my guard down… *Sigh…*” Ouka was plainly upset. “Shiren, let’s get a drink. I feel like the booze will taste better with you today.” Ouka leaned on Shiren.

“Hey, she’s underage! And so are you!”

“You’re right, Big Sis. I want to give that tomato *shochu* a shot today.”

“Don’t go along with it! And who the heck makes tomato *shochu*?!”

“Go and print out the bar coupon from online for a discount. We’ll split the bill.”

Despite being the emperor, she wasn’t willing to buy the full round of drinks.

“Hey, I know the word date got all the attention, but it really is just for show.”

Sasara would never love anyone besides Ouka.

“We’ll all go back to acting normal tomorrow.”

“If you say so. But you’ll have to draw the line somewhere,” Ouka said, looking at him like he was a fool.

“The line?”

“As a personal guard of mine.”

The next day was Monday.

“G-good morning…Ryouta Fuyukura…”

“Hey, morning…Sasara…”

When they saw each other’s faces, they quickly turned to find something else to look at.

A day had passed since the incident, but they were still embarrassed by it.

The class immediately caught wind of the odd tension between them, too.

“There’s something up with those two.” “What happened over the weekend?” “I smell drama!”

Rumors immediately started circulating.

“Wait… My negative aura is usually the most powerful in this class, but it’s being smothered… What happened? Has something terrible happened without my knowledge? Ah, of course. My unhappiness is entirely inconsequential. Like an ant carrying a grasshopper husk through the forest. Even with the butterfly effect, I doubt anything I say would move anything in this world a single centimeter… *Sigh*…”

Tamaki was depressing herself as always, but an entirely different atmosphere was indeed circulating through the room.

“You’ve seemed unhappy all morning, Sasara. What happened?” Ouka asked, standing in front of her vacant-looking guard.

“Oh, is that so? I am as I always have been, or so I’ve assumed.”

“Maybe you aren’t completely awake yet. Should I give you a good-morning kiss?”

“Oh, please do not engage in such unladylike acts. I humbly ask you to

refrain from inviting harm to yourself, even as a joke."

"You sound like a noble lady…"

"What a silly thing to say. The Tatsunami family is a distinguished lineage that has served as the Empire's bulwark for a long time."

Ouka briskly walked away from Sasara and over to Ryouta.

"Wh-what is it?"

She pinched his cheek.

"What the heck?!"

"It's your fault that Sasara's acting like nobility! Her personality is completely different! This is worse than her malaise from last week!"

"What do you want me to—?"

"She's not moaning over me anymore! She's not horny at all! She's now a completely un-depraved member of my personal guard!"

"That's a good thing! She's excelling at her work!"

"Excellence isn't interesting! She's too proper! Just look at her! She took her textbook out to prepare for the lesson!"

Sasara had her Japanese textbook open, and she seemed to be reading. Her posture was perfect. In fact, she looked so much like a model student that the whole picture was just eerie.

"But you can't ask her to act more sloppy or start lusting after yourself…"

"Anyway, it's wrong! Go check in on her! She has to be sick somehow!"

Left with no other choice, Ryouta approached Sasara.

"You're studying really hard, Sasara. I really need to study, myself…" Sasara looked up from her textbook, and her face went bright red.

"Wh-what do you want…? Have you forgotten your textbook…?"

"What? No, not really."

"Please do not talk to me without prior warning! You scared me! I am your senior as a member of the military…"

"You are, so you can teach me a lot."

"There is nothing I can teach you… Please do not speak to me in school… You embarrass me…" Sasara half hid her face in her textbook. This was all too much for her, and she didn't even want him to see her anymore.

Then something pulled on his neck—Shiren was yanking him back.

"Owwww! Hey! Stop that!"

“Silence! You will not be showing off this sweet little first-love performance to everyone else!”

“Why are you putting it like that?! And that’s not what it is!”

“You do not need to answer! I would allow you to laugh at the ‘com’ part of this whole romcom, but this is just ‘rom’! Watching you is making *me* blush!”

“Then do your blushing without the violence!”

Finally, she dragged him into a corner of the classroom.

“Dearest Ryouta,” said Kiyomizu, “I was relieved that you made it through Sunday safely, but I can’t believe it’s come to this! It’s too much! I have no choice but to use the forbidden Chobuku-ho prayer and eliminate Sasara!” Kiyomizu seemed especially motivated; she was holding an odd-looking metal weapon in her hand.

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“Stop! You’ll hurt people *and* property!”

“It’s all right. I doubt the causal relationship between incantation and unnatural death is recognized in judicial precedent. Heh-heh-heh… I will call Atavaka down for a visit…”

“I don’t know a lot about Buddhism, but stop trying to invoke scary gods!”

“—I really must draw a line somewhere.”

Ryouta heard a voice behind him and found Ouka with her arms crossed and her brows furrowed.

She was livid, Ryouta could tell.

“Well, I suppose I’ll have them get it done quietly, in accordance with the rules.”

Wednesday night, the Imperial Office.

Ouka sat in an ornate chair meant for the imperial family.

Knock-knock, knock-knock.

The door opened a crack.

“Come in,” Ouka replied with her usual casual tone.

“What is it you need of me, Lady Ouka?” Sasara entered the room, a hint of nervousness on her face.

She had already noticed that Ouka had sent everyone else away, which she wouldn’t do if this conversation weren’t extremely important. If something happened to the emperor, it would rock the whole Empire.

“Oh, it’s nothing as dark as demotion, but nothing as bright as a commendation, either. I was just thinking about a routine reconfirmation of the rules you know well.”

“The rules? I am very well aware that you are sacred and inviolable, Lady Ouka.”

“You’re right. But I mean something different. I just want you to be aware of a certain article, which is why I called you here.”

“Which is?”

“That once any member of my personal guard gets married or is firmly betrothed, they are relieved of duty. It’s written here in article eight of the personal guard bylaws.”

Sasara’s face clouded over. “Ah, that’s… Lady Ouka…”

“It’s not unusual. My personal guard is required to protect me with their lives. I cannot safely entrust my protection to guards who have others they consider more important than me. A guard who would choose to protect her significant other over me is unfit for service.”

Thus, a guard would retire upon being married.

Sasara, of course, was aware of this. She just didn’t expect to have it explicitly pointed out to her.

“There’s no shame in it. It’d just be like leaving any other company when you get married. There’s also a ceremonial aspect to the job, you know, since all of my personal guard are required to participate in any rituals along with me. I don’t want all my soldiers to be too old, so we need a regular changing of the guard.”

Sasara’s expression did not relax. Even though she was only hearing the truth, she wasn’t sure why she felt so shaken. She certainly couldn’t put it into words anyway.

“I’ll get right to the point. The moment you develop a crush on someone, you’re fired from the guard. Take your sword to protect the one you love. That will be the best for all of us,” Ouka announced cold-heartedly.

This was the emperor’s job; niceties wouldn’t help anything. She had mercilessly denied people their requests countless times.

“Nobody would know…if I had feelings for someone else.” Sasara herself was surprised by the clarity of her counterargument. “*I* don’t even know when I have feelings.”

“You’re right. You’re not a superhuman. All right, then let’s say you’re out when you officially settle on a fiancé. And it’s up to you to report on yourself. I doubt you’d want to stay a guard with such duplicity. This is what I mean by drawing the line.”

“Yes, I understand.” Sasara graciously bowed to her master.

“That’s all. You can go now.”

“Lady Ouka?”

“What is it? Are you angry? You want to hit me?”

“Thank you.” Sasara bowed again, but this one was less formal and more passionate. “There was a decision I was unsure how to make. It is thanks to you that I know not to run away.”

“I only told you the rules. You are dismissed now.”

Once Sasara was gone, Ouka sighed. “Ahh, my shoulders are so stiff… This job really stresses me out.”

She turned to the framed picture hanging on the wall, depicting her and her guard.

Sasara was there, of course. She was actually standing unusually close to Ouka. Ryouta was in the corner, too, just to make sure everyone was accounted for. They had taken his photo separately afterward, like a student who was absent from the graduation ceremony.

“Sasara, I obviously can’t control who you end up liking. Do what you will,” she said to the girl in the photo. “But you do need to draw clear boundaries.”

After staring at it for a few seconds, she sighed again.

“*Sigh*, this might actually be more of a problem than Shiren…”

She sank deep into her chair, tired.

“Being emperor is more trouble than it’s worth.”

And then Sunday arrived—the day of the date.

“What’s wrong, Shiren…?”

The most unbelievable thing had happened first thing in the morning.

Shiren was at the table studying. She had a book titled *The New Middle School Social Studies*. Ryouta could ask on why a high schooler was studying from a middle school textbook, but a miracle was a miracle.

“Silence. I’ve changed my mind. With my minion falling into depravity, I must get my act together. Otherwise the Fuyukura household will fall apart. I’ve decided to start studying hard.”

“You’ll get sick if you force yourself to do something you’re not used to.”

“It may be unusual now, but it will soon be an everyday occurrence. I will set a precedent. Be quiet! And go on your date or whatever!”

“…What’s the capital of Italy?”

“Holland.”

“…What’s the capital of France?”

“Bonjour.”

“That’s not even a place name… What’re the three branches of government?”

“Effort, friendship, victory.”

“A system of government right out of a manga… What was the battle that Tokugawa Ieyasu fought in the year 1600 that led to the establishment of the *bakufu*?”

“His inner struggle with himself.”

“Yeah, you’re right! I bet he unified all of Japan after a dramatic internal battle! All your answers are wrong!”

Her knowledge hadn’t suddenly made a huge leap, at least.

She hadn’t touched her breakfast, so Ryouta started eating on his own. With nothing else to do, he turned on the TV.

The news was just doing its horoscope section.

“And the ones with worst luck today will be those with blood type A and whose name start with R.”

“Oh no… That’s me…”

“Your life may be in danger today, so please be careful! It might be best to stay home today.”

“Seriously?! Are horoscopes supposed to be this accurate?!”

That was pretty awful, what she’d said.

Am I really going to be okay…?

When he thought back, he remembered how both Alfoncina and Kiyomizu were wary about Ryouta encountering disaster.

I must be imagining things… I’m definitely imagining things. I mean, I didn’t get hurt at all on the day of the meeting.

“Oh, Ryouta, let me give you some advice.” Shiren’s voice was hard.

“Wh-what is it now…?”

“Be responsible for the actions you take,” Shiren said with surprising maturity. “When you make your decisions, know that your actions will affect others. You’re a good person, Ryouta. If you find someone in need of help, you always lend a hand to do so. Even if means lots of extra trouble and frustration for you, you still reach out. That’s who you are.”

“You’re going overboard with the compliments. It’s not that big of a—”

“But when you reach out, there’s someone on the other end who’s taking your hand. Can you take care of those people?”

“Wh-what are you trying to say…? This isn’t like you…”

If someone was in trouble, he would help them; Ryouta didn’t need any more motivation than that.

He wasn't doing it for compliments, but he never thought he'd be rebuked for just helping people.

"I won't say any more. The rest is for you to realize. Kiyomizu pointed it out to me before, too."

Ryouta had a feeling that Shiren and Kiyomizu were getting closer these days. Shiren almost seemed to accept her.

"All right. I'll be off, then."

"Okay. *Be sure you come back.*"

At the front of the old Akinomiya station stood a bronze statue of a minor samurai general.

It was a small regional lord from the Warring States period that only the real nerds for that era in history would know. At least Ryouta, who had been born in the neighboring city of Oshiro, didn't know who it was.

Ryouta stood in front of the statue waiting for Sasara.

When the Sacred Blood Empire split from Japan, the train had stopped running through this station. Ryouta had arrived by bus. When he thought of places that were for meeting a date, the front of the train station came to mind, so that's why he picked it.

Rabbit
LittlePrincess

©Hiroki Ozaki

“Oh yeah, this might be my first-ever date, too…”

He didn’t even have a girlfriend when he’d lived in Japan. He was sure plenty of girls would have gone on dates with him because of the curse, but he wasn’t really into the idea of getting a girlfriend through brainwashing.

He also wondered if his outfit was okay. He’d tried to pick something that would look decent on him, but he wasn’t entirely confident in his fashion sense.

And since he kept hearing about fortunes and bad luck, he brought his sword.

It did feel a bit like overkill, like bringing an umbrella on a dry and sunny day, but he didn’t know what other option he had.

“Oh, you’re here already.”

Sasara had arrived five minutes before their meeting time.

Of course, she wasn’t wearing her school uniform, but she wasn’t dressed up like a noble or decked out in armor. Her outfit was something he’d see anyone wearing in town. Plus the sword. But he was used to seeing her sword anyway, so that wasn’t weird.

“Whoa…”

“What is the matter? Am I dressed that strangely…?”

“No—if anything, it’s the opposite. It really suits you…”

The youth and maturity in her look coexisted peacefully. Maybe it was her age, but Sasara really did look good in anything she wore.

“Oh, please! Do not tease me!” Sasara said with a disgruntled expression that was a bit endearing. “I did take a look at magazines to choose something nice, you know… I have never really dressed like this before…”

So this was new to her, too; Ryouta had never thought about date clothes before.

“Now, where will you be taking me today?”

“Oh… I didn’t really look into it.”

The existence of the impending date was the only thing that occupied his mind, so he had nothing in terms of a detailed schedule. He didn’t have any experience anyway, so he had no idea what they were supposed to be doing.

“Honestly, how irresponsible. We must treat this as a proper date, even if only in form. I wish you had thought at least a little about it.”

“But I don’t really know any date spots in the Empire…”

He'd visited a café with Shiren back when he'd just become her minion, but that was all he knew.

"Wait, this is a train station, so there has to be a map or something here."

There was a large sightseeing map in front of the station; maybe he could find something for them on there.

Akinomiya was an odd combination of half-rural, half-commuter town anyway, so he doubted there would be any sightseeing spots that high schoolers would enjoy. He just had to find *something*, although he wasn't expecting much as he wandered over to the map.

He quickly found a picture of a castle on top of a mountain and a cable car leading up to it.

"Wait, this has been here the whole time?!"

"Yes. That is Akinomiya Castle, which belonged to the feudal Lord Akinomiya. Were you not aware of that?" Sasara did not seem particularly shocked about this new information.

"Wait… Is this common knowledge?"

"The Akinomiya family originally lived near Akinomiya Shrine, and they controlled this area in the early sixteenth century. They built their castle on Mount Hatatate. Their most famous member is the one depicted by this statue here, Masakane Akinomiya."

"Huh…"

"He enjoyed the blessings of the Akinomiya clan's golden age. Just when it seemed he might have been able to have a chance at possibly ruling all of Japan, luck did not favor him, and he was attacked by the underlings of the men under the command of Oda Nobunaga and perished."

"What a weakling! He's barely a footnote in history!"

In short, he didn't even have a snowball's chance in hell.

"Ah, well 'perished' is a figure of speech. When the castle was surrounded and he offered to surrender, they told him the lord could save his soldiers by committing honorable suicide. He replied that he was much too scared to kill himself, so they said, 'Oh, whatever… Just leave your weapon and get out of here…' And thus, he successfully surrendered the castle without any bloodshed."

"That's embarrassing! That's *humiliating*, Masakane Akinomiya! Your disgrace lives on through the generations!"

"But it is thanks to him that the Akinomiya family has survived to this

day. Their family motto is ‘Don’t be a loser.’”

“His descendants are embarrassed, too! How can they take any pride in that?!”

When he looked back at the statue to study it, he saw there was nothing stately about it.

Masakane Akinomiya was stooping slightly, and his center of gravity was toward his back. Nothing about this man suggested he was capable of ruling all of Japan.

“The castle itself is rather magnificent. It is strategically difficult to attack, but it still fell in no time at all. That is why posterity has said, ‘Masakane was garbage. Honestly useless.’”

“Please, just stop insulting the dead! I’m starting to feel sorry for him!”

He’d never heard such specific contempt for a historical figure—but that also made him especially interesting.

“Hey, so should we go to the castle, then?”

They had nowhere else to go anyway, so it was the perfect spot.

“What? That is where we’ll be going…?” Sasara did not look at excited at all.

Ryouta wondered if he’d made the wrong choice. “Oh, maybe not, then… Just tell me if this isn’t an option. I’ll think of somewhere else to go…”

“I am not particularly interested in the mountain due to personal reasons, but… No, this must be fate. Let us go. I doubt anyone will realize we are there.” Sasara smiled, somewhat bitterly.

“But what do you mean by fate?”

“Oh, you know.”

Empire Buses

Akinomiya Station to Mount Hatatate Cable Car: 3,500 Sacred Yen

They rode the bus for fifteen minutes and came to the station where they could get the cable car up.

Mount Hatatate Cable Car
Mountain Base to Summit: 500 Sacred Yen

The cable car was empty of passengers except for Ryouta and Sasara.

"This really is a minor castle…"

"I—I suppose so… But it is the weekend. I thought there would be a few more people here…"

It was a bit awkward being in there alone together.

"I—I…have never been locked in with a man in such a small space before. What a strange feeling…"

"Y-you're exaggerating… You're not locked in here at all; it's just public transport…"

"But I do not frequently associate with the opposite sex, unlike you… You have been on plenty of dates before, have you not?"

"What are you talking about? I've never been on a date. This is my first time."

"Your…first time? It is…?"

"I-I'm not lying… Your parents won't be very happy if this isn't a real date… So it's gotta be a real date…"

"You are correct… This has to be a real date…"

It was hot in here. Probably the lack of ventilation.

"But I am surprised. I was under the impression that you were constantly going on dates with your master. After all, you do live together."

"What? No, that's not how we are at all. The master-minion relationship isn't exactly a romantic relationship."

Of course, they'd gone out alone together plenty of times, but Ryouta didn't think that counted as a date.

"Ah… I thought you two had progressed beyond that… I am disappointed for some reason."

"I mean, girls liked me plenty back in Japan, but that was all because of the curse. They don't *actually* have any interest in me."

Ga-thunk.

The cable car started going up.

"Ah, what a nice view." Sasara, who was sitting opposite Ryouta, leaned forward toward the window.

“Yeah, it is. We can see over the whole empire.”

“That must be our school.”

“Hey, you’re right. I never get to look at things from this angle, so it’s a new si—”

Squish.

A strange sensation made contact with his face.

Location-wise, it was Sasara’s chest.

“Hey, Sasara, you’re, uh…”

“Eek! I-I’m sorry!”

Ryouta was starting to notice how weird the mood was. If this had happened any time before this, then she would have yelled, “What are you doing, you pervert!” and punched him. Or jumped back in a panic or something.

But none of that happened, and Ryouta’s heart was madly pounding. The sound was quiet, but he could feel the heat in his chest.

Whoa, whoa… Aren’t we acting a little too much like a real boyfriend and girlfriend…?

Their eyes naturally met—and then locked.

This was bad. Ryouta knew it instinctively.

One more push would set off some kind of chemical reaction, and then their circumstances would fall by the wayside. The reaction would run its course, no matter whether it was good or bad.

Ryouta didn’t dislike Sasara, and he was sure the same could be said for her about him. And that was enough to set things in motion.

“I’m sorry, Lady Ouka,” Sasara whispered quietly, almost as though speaking to herself.

“What do you mean by sor—?”

“Welcome aboard and thank you for taking the Mount Hatatate Cable Car today.”

“Agh!” “Eep!”

Both of them jumped at the sudden announcement. It really was the worst timing.

"The total length of the cable is three hundred meters. It will only take a few minutes for us to reach the top of Mount Hatatate, which stands at a height of four hundred meters."

"They're really rounding the numbers."

"Please take a look below you. You should be able to see the city center. If this car were to fall, you would die."

"You don't need to tell us that! Don't scare us!"

This was when the announcement was supposed to talk about how the trees changed throughout the seasons.

"This funicular was built in 1957."

"Wait, wait, it just said funicular, didn't it?! This is a cable car! I know they both use cables, but don't get that mixed up!"

"The castle of the Akinomiya clan stands proud at the peak of Mount Hatatate. Though the castle fell in the Warring States period, the current castle was rebuilt in the mid-Showa era based on Himeji Castle and Tokyo Tower."

"Don't copy Tokyo Tower! And Himeji Castle was part of a different era!"

So this was a replica castle, built after the real thing fell into ruin. These kinds of castles were everywhere.

The Sacred Blood Empire tended to take a "good enough" attitude to everything, but apparently, Akinomiya itself had been the same even before it became Empire territory.

"This castle, made famous by Masakane Akinomiya, is feared as a reverse power spot, said to bring bad luck, bad grades, cheating spouses, overloads of spam mail, strange computer viruses, and other terrible things

to whoever visits. It also has awful feng shui."

"I don't think you need to tell that to people who are on a one-way ticket to visit! We would've called it off if we knew about this ahead of time!"

"Abandon all hope, ye on this cable car."

"Shut up!"

"Well, we're almost at the top. Thank you for riding the cable car today. Please enjoy the sights this B-tier spot has to offer."

"Don't call it B-tier yourself! That's not something you say about yourself!"

They arrived at the top station after yelling at the audio tour the whole way.

In a way, they'd gotten lucky—the entire romantic atmosphere was destroyed.

They arrived at Akinomiya Castle after a five-minute walk.

Sure enough, as they approached, they found a building made of concrete, one that almost screamed it had been built in the twentieth century. Definitely not the spot to pick for a first date.

"Well, we've come this far, so we may as well go in…"

"Indeed…"

They bought a ticket to enter for 2,000 sacred yen, placed their shoes in the shoe storage, and headed in.

Floors one to three acted as a museum.

On display were helmets and katanas of uncertain origin, and hanging scrolls from the mid-Edo era that didn't seem to have anything to do with the lord of the castle. They may not have had any legitimate cultural assets. One display was just pictures of the general drawn by local elementary school students.

"Yeah, this sure is a B-tier spot… Sorry, this is my fault. Sasara, I'm—"

Sasara was examining the displays in earnest. "Hmm… Ah, I see.

Hmm…" Surprisingly, she was carefully reading all the descriptions.

"Uh, Sasara… Is it really that interesting?"

"Oh, of course. One can attack the castle via this route."

"Hey, Sasara?"

"But if a rock were to fall here, then it would be over for everyone. Perhaps a traitor from the inside?"

"Oh, uh, yeah…"

"Hmm, hmm. I see. Ah-ha."

The exhibits seemed to be exactly to Sasara's interests. She was studying them so intently that she probably wouldn't miss a letter in the entire castle.

In the end, it almost took thirty minutes.

"My apologies, I was more interested than I thought I would be…" Suddenly aware of how she'd been behaving, Sasara seemed somewhat ashamed.

"No, it's fine. I'm glad you were happy with it. Let's go to the observation deck, then."

The stairs up were more like a ladder than anything. It was such a steep incline, they probably couldn't fit in a proper staircase.

After climbing up, they found panels about all sorts of castles.

"Whoa… I feel like you'd see these at every castle…"

But one of the panels was Western-style for some reason. It read SACRED BLOOD IMPERIAL CASTLE. Ouka's castle.

"Ouka considers this place a rival, too, huh…?"

"This is a well-known castle, so it is not a problem. Now let us go out to the observation deck."

Once they were outside, Sasara leaned over the railing.

"What a beautiful view!"

They could see the entire empire below, and Ryouta was getting a sense of what was where in a way he hadn't been able to before.

"This is wonderful."

"Yeah, I'm glad we came out here." A movie theater would've been a safer option, but this one was probably better.

But then, Sasara's face suddenly went pale, the way it might if she'd forgotten something in the middle of a trip.

“Ah… I am deeply sorry! So deeply sorry! I am deeply sorry!” She immediately flung herself to the ground in apology.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Is this some kind of Sacred Blood Holy Church etiquette or something?”

“I realized I was viewing Lady Ouka’s castle from above… This act is deserving of death…”

“Don’t worry too much about that! Calm down! On a mountain, there’s no other way to view it!”

“Oh, Lady Ouka! I am so deeply sorry for taking Ryouta!”

“What…?” What did that have to do with anything?

“Oh, I mean…I brought another one of Lady Ouka’s personal guard, who are obligated to serve her, up to the top of the mountain…”

“I see… I was the one that suggested we go here, though, so don’t worry about it…”

He got that strange feeling again. It was like Sasara kept hitting foul balls in impossible directions.

“I suppose we should go now. We might seem like real romantic partners if we watch the view for too long.”

“Yeah. It just has to be *like* a date. The marriage would be way off, anyway. And if you satisfy your parents, then we can probably shake this off…”

Ryouta turned back and looked toward the stairs down, where he found another steep set of stairs going up. It said NO ENTRY.

“Oh, there’s one more floor. But the sign says we shouldn’t go up, so I guess this is it.”

Suddenly, he felt a prickle of impending danger.

“Huh? Is this the lord’s curse? Let’s just head back…” Ryouta headed back to the stairs to descend. He went down facing away, which would’ve been dangerous if he wasn’t holding the handrail. “I really wish this castle was a little more accessible… Guess they couldn’t exactly fit in a spiral staircase, though…”

Fwsh.

Suddenly, a piece of cloth slid over his head.

Startled, he looked up—and saw panties.

They were a bright, blazing red.

“Oh, red… I wonder if it’s a Sacred Blooded thing…”

“Red? What are you talking about? …Eek! Why are you looking?! I cannot believe this!”

“Sorry! I should’ve let you go down first! Please! Don’t kick me! It’d be really bad if I fall!”

“That is not my problem! I would rather you fall from the castle tower instead!” Sasara took a few steps down to get within range, and she began to stomp on him.

“Hey! I’m seriously going to fall! This isn’t funny! I’ll close my eyes! Please! I’m sorry!”

He was genuinely losing his balance.

He didn’t realize his hand had reached out to grab something, but whatever it was wasn’t enough to support him anyway as he fell to the floor.

Fortunately, he’d come down far enough that he wasn’t injured.

“Sheesh, that was close… I probably would’ve broken a bone if I fell from the top… Guess my fortune did say that I’d be unlucky today.”

He then realized he still was holding something in his hand. Something warm. Something bright and fiery red.

It’s warm… Wait, this isn’t—?

It was. It was Sasara’s panties.

The most unbelievable thing had happened.

“The inside of my skirt feels quite breezy… Oh…” Sasara looked at Ryouta. She was stunned.

No way. I was losing my balance, and I just happened to grab her underwear, and my fall was enough to pull them off her. What a twist… Oh, I guess she’s not wearing any shoes, so they didn’t catch on them… Ha-ha-ha… Ha-ha-ha…

When a person struggles to believe what they are seeing, they typically stare blankly and try to parse the situation, and that’s what Ryouta was doing now as their eyes met.

And because Sasara was still above him, he could see her butt.

Welp, I’m going to die.

This was going to be Ryouta’s death poem:

Like a meal still hot in hand, my life ends with the rear.

Meaning: What is in his hand is still warm from being worn. His

fate is that of his meal, the last thing it sees being a rear before its warmth fades forever—he will die, his last memory being the image of buttocks.

"Pervert, shameless, degenerate, creep, hormonal, despicable, lady killer, loin-driven beast, emotional ogre, er, and, what else was there?"

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She pummeled him, and after they left the castle, she pummeled him again with invective.

And she wasn't finished. "It would be easy for me to kill you right here, but then I will go to prison. There are no other possible suspects here on this mountain, so I would be caught immediately. I will forgive you, but I will not stop you from doing the job for me. Shall we go up the tower again? No, perhaps I should change my tune—you know I find burning interesting. Why don't we test to see which hurts more—immolation or drowning?"

He had nothing to say in response.

*Also, she put her underwear back on in the castle bathrooms.

"Do not tell me this is what you have been planning this whole time. Is this why you brought me to a deserted mountain…?"

"You got this all wrong! I'm not that horrible!"

"Is the reason you have never gone on a date because you have always satisfied your lust in more cruel ways? Is that why you cannot even imagine seeing a movie or going shopping with your partner…?"

"I'm serious—please don't treat me like a criminal!"

"And aiming for the underwear straightaway makes you a—a brute… Typically, you would want to remove clothes slowly, piece by piece. But you only think with your *loins*, so…"

"You can punch me! Twice—three times, even! Just stop insulting my character!"

"There is a time and place for everything. Why must such debauchery happen in a public facility? I would rather you at least wait until we are on a deserted mountain path…"

Sasara's mouth froze mid-movement. They were on the mountain path that led from the castle back to the cable cars. A deserted mountain path.

"P-please do not get the wrong idea!!!!! I did not mean that I would like for it to happen here and now!!!!! You do anything and I will cut you down!!!!!"

"I know! No one's got the wrong idea, so just calm down! Please put your sword away!"

"I had no choice but to go on this date… Mother and Father would remain suspicious if we did not go out together at least once… This was just to fool them, so…I do not think I would be happy if you treated this as

a real date…" Sasara gazed out toward the scenery, somewhat regretfully.

"Yeah. Our only goal was to make sure you didn't have to get engaged with Toraha, and it wouldn't be good if they found us out right away."

That was why they decided to just go on one date and then see how things played out…

"I wonder what will happen now. I doubt your family will approve if we tell them our date didn't go well…"

"I—I… I don't know…"

Neither of them made any concrete declarations.

"I am not certain, but…I suspect my mother would say, *You can't get to know someone on just one date, so go on more.*"

"Yeah… You're probably right…"

If that happened, then they would have to do this over and over in the future.

"According to my mother, *You cannot trigger enough flags to trigger a personal route, so it is important to consistently go after events.*"

"Your mom sure is…unique… W-we'll eventually come up with a good idea. Eventually…"

"Yes… Eventually…"

With that awkwardness lingering between them, they returned to the cable car station.

Right next to it was a restaurant. The place was a bit run-down, but at least it was open.

"It's lunchtime now, so let's eat something," Ryouta suggested.

"Indeed. Simply waiting for the gondola would be a waste of time."

They went inside to find that the first floor was an arcade, while the restaurant was on the second floor.

"A lot of mountaintop restaurants come paired with these weird arcades, don't they?"

They first sat down and looked at the menu.

Food	
Tomato Ramen	**800 sacred yen**
Drink	
Tomato Juice	**300 sacred yen**

“Not much variety, huh?”

There was nothing to think about here.

“Ah, this must be the Red Tengu ramen shop. I have heard it is quite famous for its tomato ramen.”

“Huh. I guess you can find a place famous for just about anything. I had no idea you knew so much about ramen, Sasara.”

He had imagined she ate French cuisine every day or something.

“They just happened to be doing a segment on it when I was watching TV. This is my first time entering such an establishment…”

“Oh, okay. Well, we’ve only got one option, then. Two tomato ramens, please!”

“And one of those with a thicker soup, thicker noodles, extra vegetables, no garlic, and red ginger, please,” Sasara added.

“You’re a regular?!”

You don’t make that kind of order if you don’t know the shop’s rules.

“As I just told you, I learned this from TV. Ramen is a commoner’s food, so I am not sure of the details.”

“Right. Yeah, I guess so.”

“I am glad it is empty here. The owner of this restaurant often closes on the weekend since he attends noodle training on a whim. Those who come typically try to do so on the weekdays. The cable car network here has even gained an increase in visitors because of this ramen spot. The noodles are imported every day from factories in Japan, and they use only the natural spring water that comes from the mountain. He has a contracted farmer send him good, fresh tomatoes, and the seafood base is a perfect match for the acidity of the tomatoes. Unsurprising, considering he has trained at Ikkaku, one of the most famous establishments in Tokyo. This is a soup that anyone would want to drink down completely, and it has a reputation for attracting so many repeat customers.”

“You really know a *lot*.”

Not just anyone could drop all that at once.

“Why do you insist on this? I hardly know anything. Oh, we may serve ourselves water here. Here, this is yours.” Sasara poured Ryouta a glass from the pitcher.

“Oh, thanks.”

“Many restaurants have started adopting the meal ticket system of

ordering, but it does not seem to be the case here."

"You know, adults usually go for ramen after they go out drinking. What do you think about that?"

"I am not particularly interested. One cannot truly know the taste of ramen if one does not eat it on an empty stomach. The same goes for soba and udon. And one may not realize the subtle differences between establishments while one is drunk. You may as well settle for instant. On the other hand, we cannot yet shrug off instant ramen. Some of them are so delicious it is impossible not to say so. However, most of them use chemical seasonings that can numb the tongue, so it is not best to eat it too often."

It sounded like she was *extremely* picky about her ramen. People had all sorts of hobbies; a noble could be well-versed in common food if she wanted.

As they chatted (well, as Sasara chatted), their order arrived.

"Wonderful! Look how the curly noodles hold the broth! Please do slurp as you eat them. You will miss out on the superb flavor if you bother eating it too elegantly."

"Y-yeah… Okay…"

"The flavor of the broth truly has a great reputation. This shop even did a collaboration with a snack company to make The-Ramen-Shop-Everyone-Lines-Up-For–flavored chips."

"Hey, now that you mention it, they do taste similar!"

Ryouta had no idea that he would be thinking of those chips that he had at the convenience store here, of all places. Life was full of surprises.

Both of them had cleaned their bowls out a few minutes later.

Ryouta wondered why the shop owner came out with a piece of colored paper after they were finished eating and said, "You're Rourou, the ramen writer! I would love your autograph!" But Sasara insisted he had the wrong person, so this was probably a case of mistaken identity.

I was surprised when I found out Alfoncina was a manga artist, but Sasara can't be a ramen reviewer or anything, right…? Right… Ha-ha…

Ryouta decided not to overthink it.

"That was pretty good. Let's head to the arcade downstairs while we're here."

"Indeed. I rarely ever come here, after all."

“Have you ever gone to an arcade, Sasara?”

“Oh, heavens no. I would never go to any place that would attract delinquents.”

Considering the Tatsunami lineage, that sounded reasonable.

The arcade was generally out of date, both in terms of the games and the building itself. They probably adopted the more retro machines.

“Whoa, this baseball game’s from over fifteen years ago.”

“And here is *Space Invaders*. Isn’t it amazing that it is still operational?”

Their eyes were drawn to one game in particular—a claw machine.

The prizes inside were all merchandise from *You’re Rouko, I’m Kouko!*

It was mostly plushies, but there were rarer prizes in the back of the case, like boxed sports towels.

With a look of great interest on her face, Sasara stared hard at it. She was leaning in so close to the glass that her forehead was almost pressing against it.

She seemed desperate to give it a try.

“Have you ever played this before, Sasara?”

“No. I am not familiar with the games the lowborn play…”

Hey, this turning into a real date, Ryouta thought.

This was territory he knew: he’d let the girl play, then easily snag for her the prize she was unable to get. He’d read about this situation in manga loads of times. Even though he wasn’t an expert himself, he could probably get a hold of the easy stuff if he gave it a couple of shots.

“Wanna try it? I’ll pay.” Ryouta held out a one hundred sacred yen coin before she could refuse him.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have. I would use my own money if I were—”

“Just think of it as a test. It’s just a hundred sacred yen; you don’t have to pay me back.”

“I—I suppose you’re right… Then I will give it a go…” Sasara slowly inserted the coin into the slot.

She caught two in one.

“Ah, that was quite easy for a first go. I got Kanpiko and Kouko.”

“Wow! I had no idea you’d get them so fast…” Ryouta had never

managed to get two in one in his whole life.

I think my chances of showing off are basically DOA…

"Oh, it seems one hundred yen affords me another try," Sasara commented.

She caught the arm on the cable and nabbed another two.

"How simple. I got Rouko and Sonko this time."

"You actually have played claw machines before, haven't you?!"

"On what basis do you say that? I have never seen a real claw machine in my life. This is a UFO Catcher."

"But you know the name of this type!"

Ryouta had no idea if this was actually specialized knowledge, but she was being pretty specific.

"It really is that easy. If you lend me one hundred sacred yen, I can get any toy for you that you like."

Dammit, she looked really confident when she said that… "Fine, then get me that sports towel in the box over there."

A box sat in the farthest corner, possibly the top prize.

"I cannot."

"You were way too quick to give up!"

"No, it is physically impossible to get. The arm can only move so far, after all. It's too deep into the corner for me to knock it down. If it were a smidge closer, I would be able to knock it over in the first run, then grab it in the second, though. I have heard that some stores may make an exception for you if you sweetly say to them, *Excuse me, I have spent two thousand sacred yen, but I cannot get it*, but I would not be happy to resort to cajolery."

"You play tons of these."

"Why do you insist that I do? Everyone knows this. Oh, and some plushies are easier or more difficult to get depending on the material they are made from. And different establishments have different arm strength. This is a suburban area, so it is configured in a way that makes it easy to win, but arcades in the city weaken the strength of the arm or place prizes out of reach to combat the more advanced users, so please be careful."

“I knew you—”

“I have no experience.”

She wasn’t going to admit it, no matter what. Well, not that anything would change if she did admit it.

Sasara’s more mysterious than I thought…

Something must have happened to her in the past, but he didn’t especially care what that was.

“Here you go.” Sasara held out the four plushies to Ryouta.

“I feel kinda bad taking them…”

“I am not interested in this manga, nor will they fit in my bag anyway.”

“Right. Then I guess I’ll give them to Shiren as a gi— Ah.”

Sasara seemed a little sad.

“Oh, I shouldn’t have said that. And this is supposed to be a date…”

“No, this is fine. In fact, I’m rather relieved.” Sasara gave a carefree smile—almost too carefree. “Remember when I told my parents about how I drank your blood last week at the matchmaking meeting?”

“Oh yeah. I guess that’s what you meant by the final option…”

That was how Ryouta had been spared from a deadly battle against Toraha.

“I found the resolve to tell them on the first day of our training. Remember when your master came to watch because she was worried?”

“Yeah, she did show up. But what does that have to do—”

“It told me that a small incident would not shake the relationship you have as master and minion. That is when I realized that even the most explosive declaration would not cause any problems.” Sasara leaned against the old arcade cabinet. “Had I not handled this properly, your life would have changed forever. That was the danger that came with this entire incident. I could not have justified forcing you to marry someone you did not want to marry. At the time, I thought perhaps I should accept the engagement with Masatsuna.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just a coward…”

Sasara quietly shook her head. “Please do not worry about it—this is my own personal problem. Either way, with you, I can say at least a little more of what’s on my mind.” She was gazing off into the distance, as though she’d given up on everything. “That is why you should dally a bit more with your master. That way, I will not have to get my expectations up. I can

talk my parents out of this somehow."

"Expectations? What do you…?"

The atmosphere between them was strange, and there was a unique power in Sasara's words. He couldn't just ignore what she'd said.

"Are you seriously asking me this? I truly have no words to describe you. Insensitive, perhaps." She gazed up at the ceiling, as though in defeat. "The expectation that, perhaps, living with you would not be so bad."

"That means you…wouldn't mind marrying me…right?" The shock had nearly shorted out Ryouta's brain.

"You came to the matchmaking meeting as a candidate for marriage, did you not? The possibility of marriage is usually assumed."

"But I thought you liked Ouka. You've never really spent a lot of time with a guy, so are you sure you're not just getting the wrong idea?"

"Of course. The one I love the most at this moment is Lady Ouka. There is no lie or falsehood about that. But—"

Sasara kicked the ground, took one step closer to Ryouta, and then grabbed his hand and suddenly pulled him into an embrace.

"—You are second."

"Second…? What am I supposed to do in second place…?'

"That is why I said I wanted the inhabitants of the Fuyukura household to be a bit naughtier! And then ignore me! Then…my wavering spirit would find peace."

There was a shade of passion in her voice; she probably didn't even know what she was saying herself.

"If you don't, then I will no longer be able to make excuses for myself to Lady Ouka. I am her personal guard—how could I love someone more than Her Majesty…? How could I say anything to her after all this?!"

"Oh, so that's what she meant by drawing the line…" Ryouta now knew why Ouka had been stern.

Sasara couldn't be both married and a part of the personal guard. She couldn't walk both paths. And the only one who could make that decision was Sasara herself.

But people were weak, prone to taking the path of least resistance and refusing to make a choice without some kind of compelling force.

Ouka had anticipated this problem, so she told Sasara to draw the line somewhere.

“Hey, Sasara, think about this again with a clear head. This is a big choice, one that’ll either take you to the left or the right—”

Suddenly, a powerful force ripped him away from Sasara and tossed him to the ground.

For a moment, he couldn’t hear anything, but then his lower back took a heavy blow, bringing back both sound and pain.

Who was this?

“Gimme a break.”

Above him stood Masatsuna Toraha, furious and apparently ready to cut Ryouta down at any second.

“What the hell, Toraha?! What are you doing here?!”

“I could ask you the same thing! You were the one squealing below my house!”

“What? When have I ever gone to your house?”

“Weren’t you looking at the view earlier?”

What? Was he saying he lived in Akinomiya Castle?

“Akinomiya Castle is also my house. You saw the no entry sign, right? Everything above that is our living space.”

“So that danger I sensed was you, huh…? Why do you live in a public facility?!”

“Public facility? My ancestors built that castle five hundred years ago. It only became public in modern times. The place above the observation deck is our house.”

“Oh yeah, Masakane Akinomiya, Masatsuna Toraha—your names are kind of similar…”

Both names had “Masa” in them, and some families still maintained the old tradition of using a similar element in all their names, so maybe…

“I am the twenty-fifth generation of direct descendants from Masakane! The family was embarrassed by the link, so we changed our last name!”

“Oh yeah, I did hear that his family is still around…” Ryouta had no idea the guy’s descendants would be so close by. “But I heard your ancestor was a loser… Are you sure you’re really a good swordsman?”

“One more word out of you and I will kill you where you stand. My family has worked hard to forget the loser-hood! Don’t such complexes usually drive people to work unusually hard?!”

Toraha seemed really aggravated. But then again, Ryouta had never seen

him not aggravated.

Ah, I guess this is why Sasara wasn't so keen in coming up the mountain…

He almost wanted to blame himself for inviting her up here without knowing why.

"Masatsuna, this has nothing to do with you. Leave!" Sasara, being Sasara, had no compunctions about yelling at her cousin.

"Yes it does, Lady Sasara. I've been listening to your conversation. Right from the moment you said 'Return my underwear to me at once, lest I cut you down!'"

"Stop! Just forget about that! Pretend it never happened!"

He had tuned in at a very dark period in Ryouta's life.

"That alone is an unforgivable crime, but let us set that aside for the moment. According to your conversation, I believe this boy is not your fiancé. At the moment, neither of you have any intention of actually getting married. Even if you truly did take his blood."

Toraha's expression was cooling from anger into something more like distrust.

"Well, I mean… It's still kind of early for us to decide on marriage…" Ryouta interjected.

"But you would not mind being betrothed to this boy? Lady Sasara, allow me to battle with him. I, too, have samurai blood. If I am to take you, then I wish to settle this by the sword."

"Please do not settle anything without my permission! Th-this is not about who I like, but…I still cannot yet imagine marriage…"

"How do you intend to make Lady Sasara happy, boy?" Toraha turned a sharp eye to Ryouta.

"H-how? I—"

"If *I* were to marry into the Tatsunami family, then her relatives will be peaceful and secure. We will also protect the family's martial lineage. This boy has nothing. And *I*"—Toraha grinned—"can say with clear confidence that I love Lady Sasara."

That was a huge difference between them.

Ryouta, of course, had never told Sasara he loved her.

"Please pardon my insolence, Lady Sasara." Toraha's hand made firm contact with the nape of Sasara's neck.

“Ah…” Sasara’s head immediately drooped—she was unconscious.

Toraha caught her with great gentleness and care.

“Sasara! Hey, are you okay?! You can’t do that to a girl!”

“Of course she’s all right. I am no amateur.” Toraha lifted her up bridal style, like a prince and a slumbering princess. “At the top of this mountain is a rocky stretch called Senjojiki. I will be waiting for you there. Come when you are ready.”

“Yeah, I’ll be right th—”

“Really? Are you truly ready? I am not asking whether you are resolved to take another’s life.” Toraha cut Ryouta off. “I am asking you if you’re ready to tell Sasara exactly how you feel about her.”

Ryouta froze. Toraha wouldn’t accept a simplistic reason like “bad guy kidnap girl, good guy save her.”

“If you feel nothing for her, then do not bother. Report me to the police, to her parents if you will. That would be the proper course of action, and I will not hold it against you.”

What Toraha said threw Ryouta’s emotions into chaos.

“Farewell. Come, if you will.”

With great speed, faster than anyone carrying another person should have been able to, Toraha ran off with Sasara in his arms.

TELL US, SASARA!

Q: I want to get better at kendo. What should I do?

Just practice. For example, after spending thirty thousand yen on a claw machine, you will get the hang of it and snag the normal plushies with no trouble—I would say it's the same. I do not know very much about claw machines, however.

So you *are* an expert!

Q: On the day before a match, do you usually eat katsu because it sounds the same as "to win"?

I eat ramen.

I *knew* you liked ramen!

No, because it sounds the same as "to win."

No, it doesn't!

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EPISODE 5

LET'S RESCUE THE DAMSEL IN DISTRESS!

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EPISODE 5

LET'S RESCUE THE DAMSEL IN DISTRESS!

"Hmm, they're not here yet~. *Ehem, ehem.*"

"You're right~. I was almost certain that they would arrive~."

"We've been waiting for an hour, yet they have not shown themselves! My legs are getting sore…"

Rei, Kiyomizu, and Alfoncina were waiting at an arcade in the Empire's shopping mall. Just waiting, and not playing the games.

Of the three, Rei was somewhat upset. "*Sigh…* I can't believe Ryo's off on a date with someone… I wish he'd told me… My soul is about to leave my body from the shock… *Ehem, ehem…*"

Rei the ninja had apparently heard the news from her boss, Ouka.

"I think he didn't tell you because he didn't want your soul to leave your body," Kiyomizu piped up.

"I see! This is how Ryo shows his love! Yaaay!"

Rei was brought back to high spirits instantly, while Kiyomizu whispered, "What a fool."

"But Ryo still isn't here~." Rei scanned the area again.

The arcade was fairly busy for the weekend, but Ryouta was nowhere to be seen.

"How odd~. I thought most everyone comes to arcades on dates~. Claw machines are a classic, after all."

"I thought the same! But I see neither Sasara nor Ryouta dearest!"

"Waaah! This means we failed to ruin their date~! And the air in here is so stagnant, I cannot stop coughi—*ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem.*"

Despite her coughing fit, Kiyomizu and Alfoncina made no move to comfort her.

"Oh… I'm getting the sense that I'm not part of this group…"

"You are very relaxed for a big sister. We want to ruin their date, too, but

we have a more serious problem here."

"What?! What kind of problem? Is Ryo getting married…? That shouldn't happen, so we should be fine, shouldn't we?"

"By the reckoning of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood, Ryouta has the worst luck~. I do hope his life hasn't been endangered somehow." Alfoncina was acting lighthearted, but her eyes were serious.

"Exactly. Ryouta dearest's luck is unusually bad. He is like the friend who says, 'I'll get married when I come back from war' after getting drafted." Kiyomizu's worry was showing itself, too. "And as a relative of Ryouta dearest, you should be aware of this, too. Bad luck can sometimes infect close relatives."

"O-oh no, could that—? *Ahem, ahem, ahem, cough!! Gu-hack! Huff…* Ah… *Cough, cough…*"

Rei fell flat on the floor, having coughed herself unconscious.

"Oh no, she fainted! I think she may have truly been infected by his bad luck!"

"What perfect timing."

"I'll go stick her in the first-aid office for now!"

"Okay. She might be used to all this, but Ryouta isn't."

Rei was groaning quietly. "…Oh, a field of flowers~. So many rare blossoms here~. What, I have to pay a fee to get past here? How much is it? Six *mon*? I don't have the old coins on me! Fine, I'm leaving!"

Apparently, she was dreaming about something.

"I think she's hovering between life and death!"

"She's not going into the flower field, so I suppose she's all right~. Rei, Rei? Are you all right?! Stay away from the flowers!" Alfoncina started forcefully calling to Rei.

"…Oh dear, I'm lost now… Ahh, a person with one eye is chasing me! Help, help!"

"She's come across something supernatural! Is she all right?!"

"It might be best to pray for her… This might be surprisingly dire…"

"…Ah, there it is. Up in the sky, I must go—" And Rei suddenly fell quiet.

"They say people go into the sky when they die—she isn't dead is she? Oh dear…"

"Her heart still seems to be beating, so I think she should be all right…"

Neither of the other girls were used to dealing with Rei, so they were perplexed as to what to do with the unconscious girl.

Three minutes later—

Rei slowly woke up. “I dreamed I went to a flower field, but they told me to pay six *mon*, but you can only find the coins in museums nowadays. So I came back.”

“You might not’ve been able to come back if you did pay. That is exactly the price needed to cross the river of the dead, after all.”

“My…that was close… But Ryo should be all right then, too. He doesn’t have six *mon* anyway.”

“That is not the problem here!”

“Oh, and I gave Ryo some words of encouragement, too,” Rei said airily.

““What?””

Ryouta sat in a chair in the little arcade at the cable car building.

He should have gone right after Sasara; he even had his sword with him today.

But what Toraha said weighed heavily on him.

Come when you are ready.

Ryouta had no idea if he was ready.

At the very least, he couldn’t say he loved Sasara the way Toraha did. Even if he did say it, it would be an obvious lie. He hadn’t had any romantic feelings for her during all of this.

I mean, she is cute, but that’s not the problem…

Maybe he should just give the Tatsunami family a call, just like Toraha said. But that wouldn’t make anyone happy.

Oh yeah, and Shiren also said to me…

“Be responsible for the actions you take.”

She’d given him a warning. People had only so many hands. If he reached out to everyone, he would soon run out.

Still, I can’t just hop on the gondola and go home!

“Oh, so pensive~.”

“Yeah, I’m not ready or decisive or anything…”

“I see. It is an incredibly big decision for someone your age. I suppose

even those under eighteen want to buy adult books, too."

"No, that's not it! This isn't a…teen sex thing! It's way bigger than that!"

"Teen sex things are a big deal! Do not take them so lightly!"

"I mean, yeah, but you're emphasizing… Wait." Ryouta wondered who on earth he was talking to. He cautiously lifted his gaze to the chair next to him to find…his sister. "Why are you here, Rei?"

"Hmm, well, I'm not really sure myself, but I *ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem*ed, couldn't breathe, fell unconscious, then suddenly found myself here."

"Wait, are you sure you're not dead?! Are you okay?!"

Now that she mentioned it, she was a little translucent.

"C'mon! Don't do this! What am I supposed to do if there's a death in my family *now*, of all times?!"

"Hmm. I suppose you could say I'm a living ghost. This happens to me about once every three weeks. They were charging to get into the flower garden, so I turned back and that's when I found you."

"I have no idea what I'm supposed to say… T-take care?"

"I should be all right. If you're worried about something, Ryo, I can help you."

"But this is my problem…"

"Well, I'm old enough, so I can buy as many age-restricted books as you want me to. I'll even buy the ones with extra rare fetishes!"

"No! This isn't because I'm embarrassed about going to buy them at the store! This is a relationship thing!"

"Ah, I see~."

She finally understood, although he'd almost lost track of what was serious and what wasn't as he was talking to Rei.

"I've been through a lot in my life, so I would be happy to give you some advice." Maybe it was because she was a living ghost, but Rei looked more grown-up than usual. "Shouldn't you just speak honestly?" she said.

It was a normal piece of advice, not a magical panacea or anything.

"I know you might be afraid to speak honestly, but that might be your only choice. If you lie, you will most certainly find unhappiness. And that's what's important—you."

"But if I just think of myself, then—"

“Someone who cannot make themselves happy has no chance of making others happy.”

Ryouta couldn’t say anything in return. Right now, he couldn’t make Sasara happy, he knew.

“If a person doesn’t have one yen, then they don’t have any yen to donate.”

“Yeah.”

“By the way, how much is six *mon* in today’s money? I need it to get into the flower garden.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to pay! That’s a traditional offering to the little statues at the graveyard!”

“Oh, that’s right, there was free entry to the garden yesterday. I just missed it~.”

“You barely just managed to stay alive, Rei! Please don’t leave! If you’re a living ghost, go back to your body!”

“But why is it today that I’ve managed to come to you?”

It was a simple question. Frankly, Rei had come close to death countless times.

“I think you must be quite close to death, yourself, Ryo.”

“That’s a scary thing to say…”

“But you’ll be all right. You don’t have six *mon*, either.” Rei looped around toward Ryouta’s face, then smiled and nodded. “Bye-bye.”

She vanished so completely that Ryouta almost wondered if he’d imagined the whole thing.

“Yeah. It’s not like all of my problems’ve been solved or anything.”

His only choice was to face the challenge head-on. He didn’t really have any other choice to make.

“Okay, I got some rest, so now it’s time to work.”

He gripped his sword.

“Time to save the damsel in distress.”

There was a flat, rocky surface on the mountain, where no trees provided shelter from the sunlight.

It almost looked like a thousand sheets of rock had been laid out next to each other, which is exactly what its name, Senjojiki, meant.

And there was Toraha and Sasara.

Sasara had been crying the entire time, although the exact reason for her tears was unclear.

“I understand how painful this must be, Lady Sasara, but please have some self-control.”

Toraha was watching the path he had used to come here, assuming Ryouta would follow them.

“You’ve grown,” Sasara sniffed. “You have always been a loser; you would go and hide every single time you saw me.”

Sasara had no idea that Toraha would do something so daring. He may have been skilled with a sword, but his mental game was still a bit weak.

“Please do not say that to me… I had to grow at least a little bit. All to make you happy, Lady Sasara,” Toraha declared. “Even if you did taste his blood, I doubt many people know. We only need to pretend it never happened, and then you can marry me. And quit the Imperial Guard.”

“Do not make my decisions for me! Do you even understand my relationship with Lady Ouka?!”

“You cannot be an Imperial guard forever. You will eventually have to graduate and move on, just like high school.”

“You may be right, but…”

“And not even Her Majesty the Emperor can marry you to make you happy, Lady Sasara.”

“I know that…”

By presenting every bit of reality to her, one by one, Toraha snipped off Sasara’s strings.

“And I understand why you think about that boy. His blood saved you from death. But he causes you to hesitate, so I will prevent him from doing so.” Toraha drew his sword and cut into a nearby rock.

A crack formed in the rock. The top half slowly slid out of place, then fell.

Only a master had the skill to slice a rock in two with a sword.

“Please do not kill him…”

“Well, that will depend on his decision.” Toraha turned to his cousin and smiled. “If he decides to throw it all away and choose you, then I will acknowledge my defeat and hand over my rights to him.”

“What?”

“Masakane Akinomiya will be the last sore loser in my family. Once a determination has been made, I will not start grumbling with excuses. But that boy seems entirely unqualified, so I have no choice but to intervene. That is all.”

There came the sound of footsteps shuffling on stone as Ryouta slowly approached. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Toraha. I had a good think.”

“I was not expecting your eyes to be so clear. Tell me your answer.” Toraha quietly held his sword at the ready.

He was completely grounded as he did so, as though he had been raised with that sword for decades. Even an amateur could immediately sense his skill.

Ryouta held his sword at the ready, too. It was a fine article, given to him by the emperor herself.

“Here’s my answer: Break off your engagement with Sasara. And I’ll pretend like my engagement never happened. Sasara will remain a part of the emperor’s personal guard,” Ryouta announced calmly.

There was nothing to get worked up over, after all. Nothing needed to change at all.

“Listen! Enough with your jokes!” Pure, palpable malice filled Toraha’s eyes, and he dashed straight toward Ryouta.

Ding! came a dry metallic sound.

Ryouta had blocked with his sword—the attack had gone straight for his head.

Either way, Toraha wasn’t going to just kill him outright. Even if he knew capital punishment was the answer, he still needed to ask the suspect’s motives.

“So you’re not choosing *anything*! You came all the way out here to give me the most irresponsible answer?! I have never been so disappointed in my life, Ryouta Fuyukura!”

As their swords scraped against each other, they glared hard at one another.

“Do you love Lady Sasara, or no? Which is it?!”

“Oh yeah, I can give you a clear answer. And you listen, too, Sasara, since you’re here.”

With tears still in her eyes, Sasara stared at Ryouta.

“Do I love Sasara? No. She’s a precious friend, but nothing other than

that.” Ryouta gave up all feelings of romance—although technically, he couldn’t give up something he never had in the first place.

Emotion vanished from Sasara’s face as she slowly processed what he said.

“Then that means my path has been set…”

Sasara Tatsunami and Masatsuna Toraha would be engaged, and that would be that.

They just needed to tell her parents about the whole situation, and then it was over. She would have to submit her resignation from her post as an Imperial guard.

Whatever happened, he just needed to wait it out.

“Then do what’s right and stand down. Lady Sasara will be in good hands.”

Toraha took off a bit of pressure; he no longer had a reason to kill this noncommittal boy. He had no interest in taking a life for no reason.

“Sorry, what? Why do I have to do that? I’ve obviously gotta fight to save my friend from you.”

In the next moment, the blade sliced through Ryouta’s arm. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as red blood oozed from the cut.

An experienced swordsman could handle a blade so deftly that the bleeding wouldn’t start for some time until after the pain.

The two stepped back from each other.

“Glad to see that didn’t hamper your skill. I just wanted to make sure you wouldn’t be able to hold the sword anymore.”

“I’ve heard I’m pretty good for a novice. Even if you did get me.”

“I did give you the role of prince that saves the princess, after all. I hate those kabuki shows that end in a double suicide; they leave a bad aftertaste. I made sure to specifically tell you to come only when you’re ready, see.”

“All your examples are outdated.”

“Oh, come off it. But instead you came here to tell me you have no intentions of marrying the princess. To be honest, I’m shocked.”

Even Ryouta could tell that the master swordsman’s mind wasn’t exactly a calm sea. That was probably why Ryouta was still alive.

If Toraha was in turmoil, he would make more mistakes.

“How do you intend to make the princess happy?! It’s your responsibility!” Toraha cut Ryouta’s arm again, this time up by the top of

his shoulder.

As Ryouta reeled from the pain, Toraha cut him again.

This fight was barely a fight at all. At this rate, Ryouta would be a mangled corpse in only a few minutes.

Maybe he should cry and apologize and hope that would ensure his survival. If he told Toraha that Sasara was all his, invite his disappointment and scorn, then Toraha might have forgiven Ryouta.

Well, if I didn't want to die, then I shouldn't have come here in the first place. I know what I should do if I want to get through this alive.

But he didn't want to survive with regrets.

Conveying exactly how I feel is my way of fulfilling my responsibility.

Ryouta had never planned to lay a single blow on Toraha; he just needed to survive until he said what he needed to say.

But his enemy was merciless.

"You need to die." Toraha stabbed him in the stomach, and the pain that surged through his body this time was nothing like what had come before.

He might not survive this.

Even though he'd made it out of plenty of tough situations before, this time might be when his luck ran out.

But if he perished here, what was it all for?

He still had a job to fulfill.

"What am I going to do about the princess's happiness? If you don't know the answer yourself, Toraha, then go back to your temple elementary school!"

Ryouta took a deep breath and said:

"The princess decides her own happiness! It's not something a prince decides for her!"

Sasara's eyes widened.

A weak breath escaped Toraha's lips.

Up until this point, Ryouta had made the same mistake. Toraha had lost hold of something very important.

Neither of the given choices included what Sasara Tatsunami herself wanted. External forces were going to decide everything for her before she

could ever express her own will.

"A princess has the right to choose her prince—or to stay a princess forever. What do you want to do, Sasara?"

That was enough with the metaphors. Covered in wounds, Ryouta asked Sasara the question.

"How should I know?!" she yelled, her voice choked with tears. "What am I supposed to do as an Imperial guard? I have no idea how I'm supposed to talk with Lady Ouka about this; it's so, so difficult! It occupies my thoughts all the time. How am I supposed to give my official answer now?! I am not so strong, nor so simple!"

This wasn't a simple question of A or B. She might not find a satisfactory answer tomorrow, or the next day, or even after a whole year.

"Yeah. But that's why I came." He found himself smiling much more than he'd expect, being on the verge of death. "There's no time to think carefully about it. So let's pretend this engagement business never happened. And talk more to Ouka about being her personal guard. Make her take off her mask as the emperor."

"All right!"

"And feel free to talk to me if there's ever anything I can help you with. We're friends, after all."

He'd said everything he needed to say; his work here was done.

He fell to his knees.

He'd lost too much blood; his head spun.

I really think I'll be able to see the flower garden soon… The little brother goes after the older sister, huh…? We're so far from the hospital here. Of all times…

Even though he'd acted knowing full well the risks, he was still afraid to die. And he'd left so much unfinished.

Who's going to take care of Shiren? I doubt anyone besides me could pull it off… I bet they'd treat the whole thing like a joke after like, three hours and just leave.

He had plenty of other regrets, but it didn't seem like he'd be settling those, either.

A wave of vertigo, ten times greater than anything else he'd experienced in his life, overcame him. His body was falling apart.

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But what can I do? If I run now, I'd be basically leaving her to die. That would be embarrassing…

His vision blurred, and nausea was slowly rising from his stomach.

Ahh, I wish I'd talked more with Shiren today… I won't be able to come home n—

—Don't die.

A voice echoed in his head.

What's this? God?

—I'm telling you. Don't die.

Okay, but this really isn't up to me…

—This is a command to you, minion. Don't die! Obey your master's orders!

My master? Wait, this isn't Shiren, is it…?

—Unfortunately, it seems like Shiren hasn't made you her minion.

So is this Alfoncina, then?

The only other Sacred Blooded that had bitten Ryouta besides Shiren were Alfoncina and Tamaki.

The relationship between master and minion wasn't just a social thing. The two could engage in a type of telepathy.

—You can't die just yet, Ryouta. It's not too late to have more fun with me, don't you think?

But I don't really have much blood left…

—Oh, now don't get the wrong idea. This is an order. An order from master to minion. Don't die, don't die, don't die, don't die, don't die. Live, live, live, live, live, live, live, live. You will live, Ryouta Fuyukura!

Those orders are kind of harsh…

—Do not do to others what you do not wish for yourself, Confucius once said. It essentially means what you think it means. Conversely, do to others what you would have them do to you. That is how I live my life. You want someone to tell you to live, right, Ryouta? You don't want someone to tell you to give up.

Wow. Well, you are the author of YouRou IKou… *You're right, though… I want to live.*

—On your feet, then. Stand up. This wouldn't have happened if you'd given up on Sasara, though. Or if you declared that you would make her happy by marrying her. But I rather foresaw that you wouldn't have done

that.

But I can't say for certain if I don't know. Why do I have to give an answer right away? No one has the right to order me or Sasara to do that.

—I'd expect nothing less of you, Ryouta. You've deliberately chosen the thorny path. But I suppose that's just part of your grandfather's curse~.

Wait, was giving orders to a minion supposed to come with a thorough conversation like this…? I thought you could only do simple requests…

—Don't underestimate the archbishop~. And it means that I am serious about this. Carry out the orders. Do your duty.

The message from Alfoncina cut off.

He had no choice but to do it.

Ryouta planted his foot firmly on the ground one more time.

Slowly, he stood atop the rocks, and he was surprised at how easy it was.

His head was spinning, but he managed it. He couldn't exactly disobey his orders anyway.

Toraha could hardly believe what he was seeing.

"You didn't think I'd stand, did you…? Sorry, but I'm a sore loser…"

"This can be your win…," Toraha muttered, apparently ready to bolt at any second. "You're right. My sincerity has nothing to do with Lady Sasara's feelings. I have no right to control her."

Even though he was on the brink of death, Ryouta had emerged victorious. But whether he would be able to *stay* alive was a different question entirely.

Toraha could tell that Ryouta had nothing left.

"You have incredible willpower. But you cannot do any more. Without further ado—"

Toraha brought his sword down on Ryouta.

But another blade stopped it.

"I do not think this is over." Sasara had stepped in to help, and not a moment too soon. "We are not doctors. We should leave him in the hands of professionals now. And…" Her eyes were burning with the will to save Ryouta. "Masatsuna, can you risk your life to keep me from helping him?"

"Oh, ah—"

"Answer me!"

"I—I'm sorry! I overstepped my boundaries!" Toraha folded.

"You may not be aware of this, but this boy is more resilient than anyone

I've ever known. I am certain he will be all right. I will save him. Can you grab my shoulder?" Sasara slowly knelt before Ryouta.

"Y-yeah… I think…"

He thought he felt pain shoot through him when Sasara took him up on her back, but he was too numb to be sure. All he could feel was her body heat.

"Ah, it's so warm…"

"I am not wearing armor today."

"I'm getting blood on your clothes… Sorry…"

"It does not matter, so long as we can get you back alive."

Would he be able to survive that? He figured his chances were about fifty-fifty—much better than they had been before, at any rate. When he first collapsed, he'd assumed it was all over.

"Ryouta Fuyukura, you are a true samurai. I guarantee it," Toraha admitted.

"Oh, thanks…," Ryouta replied.

"If you can live through this, then I will treat you to an assortment of tops and milk caps."

"Oh, no thanks… Well, maybe I should take it…" Ryouta Fuyukura didn't have any money anyway, so maybe that was the perfect gift.

"Lady Sasara, I…I'm terribly sorry for causing you trouble…"

"If you have time to be apologizing to me," Sasara interjected, smiling with great maturity, "then you should be praying for his safety."

"A-all right!"

"Let us hurry!"

Sasara dashed away.

"I will run all the way to the cable car station, all right?!"

It felt like her ankles were going to give out. She hadn't expected to come up the mountain in the first place, so she hadn't prepared for such a long run. She couldn't imagine worse conditions.

But she had to do this. She was going to save Ryouta.

That was all she could do.

Her back was hot; she could feel the heat and blood from his body.

"Sorry, Sasara…"

“Ah, you can still talk. Then you should be all right.”

“I hope so…”

“I am afraid you must survive this. You told me you would talk with me if I had any concerns. I would very much not like not to lose you.”

“Yeah, you’re right… I did say that…”

“And you may be the one to become my husband.”

“Huh…? Oh, yeah…” Ryouta couldn’t see her face, but she was sure he was blushing.

“Do you think I was joking or sincere?”

“Huh?”

“It is a secret.”

Hee-hee-hee.

There was an affectionate smile in her voice.

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EPILOGUE

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EPILOGUE

"Oh, you're alive."

When Ryouta came to, he was in a hospital bed.

He had been put on the cable car, then loaded onto an ambulance that was waiting for him at the bottom of the mountain. Sasara hadn't had the time to call one, so it must have been waiting there this whole time.

Alfoncina had apparently called for it. It was unclear why she knew exactly where to send it, but she had said, "I know my minions." Thanks to her, Ryouta didn't have to wait a single second to get to the hospital.

The need to thank Alfoncina had vaguely bounced around Ryouta's head until he soon blacked out.

I wondered if I would ever open my eyes again.

He suddenly realized that someone was gripping his hand as his consciousness returned.

Sasara was asleep, leaning over Ryouta in the bed, her hand in his.

"I think it's your strength that saved me," he said. With gratitude, he reached out to gently touch her head.

"I am awake, you know." Sasara suddenly sat up. "But I did not think you would try to pat my head," she said with a cool voice.

"Sorry, I forgot myself for a sec…"

This would be super embarrassing if anyone had seen them.

"But it's all right. Everyone feels lost at some point. I cannot fault you for it."

"Thanks… Man. I'm surprised I survived…"

"Well, ever since I passed out from a nosebleed once before, they've improved the distribution of blood for transfusions. We were able to get you one easily."

"*That's* how you've saved me?!"

"Relationships are a strange thing, you see." Sasara smiled as she drew back the curtains on the window. Bright light poured into the hospital room.

“I spoke to my parents about canceling the engagements, everything.”

“Did they…approve?”

“They did. They wanted me to be happy.”

Ryouta thought about how strong she was, and he could see the newfound sense of freedom in her.

“Ah, and they had no problem transfusing blood and stopping the bleeding, so I have summoned all various related parties.”

“What does that mean?”

The door opened, and a familiar set of pigtails caught Ryouta’s eye.

“Oh, Shiren, it’s not too ba—”

She jabbed her fingers into his eyes.

“Owwwwww! Why would you do that to an injured—?”

“I don’t want to hear it! You are always, always, *always* causing trouble for your master! Get a grip! Get a grip on yourself, Ryouta!”

She started raining punches on him. Including where he’d been stabbed.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagh! Stop! You’re going to reopen everything! I’m gonna die!”

“I thought I told you to come home in the morning! Why did you get so injured that *I’m* the one who had to go see you?!” Shiren hugged him.

“Oh…”

Shiren had indeed told Ryouta to come back just as he was leaving. He hadn’t given much thought as to what feelings lay behind those words.

“I… I get lonely easily. Whenever you go out somewhere, I start worrying you’ll never come back. If you don’t, I won’t be able to read my favorite manga!”

“Sorry. I should’ve been more careful…”

“Good. Because you need to think hard on what you’ve done. I think we might need an apology press conference for this.”

“But this is how I personally wanted to take responsibility for things. You told me to do that, Shiren. I was kind of following your message—can you try to see it that way?”

“Oh…”

Getting hospitalized wasn’t part of the plan, but his actions made sense to him.

“You’re so stupid, Ryouta. I think you might be even more stupid than me.” Shiren slowly wrapped her arms around him.

“Where’s the seat of the Kanagawa prefectural government?” Ryouta asked.

“Mexico.”

“Yeah, I think you’re still the champ on that front.”

“Well, I see how hard you’ve worked. I suppose I can acknowledge that. But the fact still remains that you didn’t follow what I said to the letter.” Shiren pouted.

“Yeah, you’re right… We’re seeing each other again at the hospital.”

“This warrants a seveeere punishment.”

“Please don’t suck my blood… I would actually die.”

“—Your sentence is…I am going to serve you.”

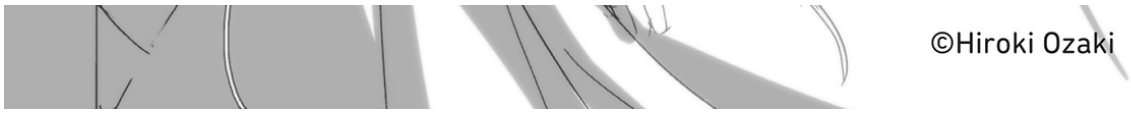
“What?”

“It’s going to take several days before they let you go, right? So I will serve you until they do! And I will make you understand just how great your master is! When I’m finished with you, you won’t be able to think of anyone else! Be ready!” Shiren declared proudly, puffing out her chest. She hadn’t remotely considered the implications of the role reversal.

“Uh, okay… Please be gentle…”

The door opened again.

“Ryouta dearest! You’re all right! I flew here at Mach speed when I heard you were injured!”



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“Ryo! Are you okay?! Your big sister was so worried, she almost died… *Ehem, ehem…*”

“I am glad to see you again in the world of the living~. Come by to give your thanks at the cathedral when you can~.”

The arcade trio rushed in.

“Here you go, Ryouta, I brought you a gift.” Alfoncina handed over a large box wrapped in a bag.

“Thank you! What is it, though?”

“It’s the DVD box set of *YouRou IKou!*”

“Thanks, but the hospital TVs don’t play DVDs! They’re the kind you have to swipe a card to watch…”

“I brought you a gift, too!” Kiyomizu piped up.

“Thanks. Hmm, you don’t have anything, though… Wait, why are you wearing a big ribbon on your head? You’re starting to look like my sister.”

“My gift to you is my body—”

“Nope.” Ryouta knew where that was going, so he turned her down before she could finish.

“Oh, that’s an option!” Rei cried. “Ryo, my gift to you is my—”

“No thank you.” He also shot his sister down with lightning speed.

And the door opened again.

“Excuse us…,” Tamaki said, “I really feel terrible that a mass of bacteria like me is being let into the hospital… Please forgive me, I’ve disinfected myself as much as I could…”

“Heya!” Kokoko chirped. “Sis Tamaki and I’ve come to visit.”

“Hey, I had no idea you’d be coming along, too, Kokoko. Thanks!”

“Here’s a present,” said Kokoko. “Eat it.” It was a double rice ball set that occasionally came with a pack of pickled vegetables. But there was only one inside. “I ate the konbu one.”

“Don’t give me your leftovers!”

“Oh, and here’s an open bag of The-Ramen-Shop-Everyone-Lines-Up-For–flavored chips.”

“At least bring me one that’s still sealed! It’s basically crumbs in here! Agh… All this complaining raised my blood pressure; now I feel sick…”

Ryouta’s snark almost did him in.

“Um, I thought I should bring a gift for you as well, so I brought this… I think it suits your interests, but…if you don’t want it, then you can throw it

on the ground… Maybe I should have thrown it away before I give it to you. I probably should."

"At least let me see it first." No gift deserved to be tossed before it was even given.

"I thought for a while about it, but I thought this might be the best…"

Shijou's probably brought the safest gift out of all of these. She works at a convenience store, so it's probably some fruit…

It was the *Kairakuten* porn magazine.

"Please be sure to use it at night…"

"Just go ahead and toss it, actually."

Sasara stood in the back, chuckling as she watched the interactions. "Well, I'm very glad I didn't get my hopes up."

There was no way for her to slip into the conversation here.

"Now, I suppose I'll report to Lady Ouka about drawing my line."

There was a knock on the door of the Imperial Office.

"Yes, come in."

Ouka paused in reading her documents and looked up.

"Pardon me, Lady Ouka." Sasara slowly entered. Her expression was brighter somehow.

"Well, well. Is there something you've resolved?"

"How can you tell…? I've not said a word…"

"You underestimate me. The emperor knows how the people of her country feel. There is more to my job than raising taxes, you know."

There was no imperial dignity or intensity on Ouka's face—she was talking to Sasara like one of her friends at school.

"I thought a lot about my own life since our talk, and I had my parents annul talks of my engagement. I will continue to be a part of your personal guard, Lady Ouka."

"I see. Then there's no problem at all. I hope you keep doing well at your job."

Ouka smiled gently. She never wore that expression while working—only when she was relaxing in a moment for herself.

"Yes. And I've brought a present for you today," said Sasara.

"A present?"

“Here it is!” Sasara placed something in Ouka’s hand, something just a bit bigger than her palm.

It was a stuffed doll modeled after Sasara.

“…What…is this?”

“A stuffed doll of me. I always had dolls of you, see. I thought it unfair that you never had one of me.”

Sasara took three more Ouka dolls into her hand. And since they were all attached to her belt, they wouldn’t fall off.

“Sorry, I don’t really see the logic,” Ouka said, but she ran her finger over the doll; it wasn’t so bad. Maybe she didn’t mind getting handmade trinkets from her vassals after all.

“Think of it as myself. If you keep me on your person at all times, I will be sure to drive away all evil. I’ve included a bit of my hair on the inside, and some of my bodily fluids—”

Ouka hurled it in the trash.

“*Gasp!* You are so quick to bully me. What a sadist you are! So hardcore! Hnnnng… Please bully me for real…”

“I’m not being a sadist; I just threw it away. The opposite of love isn’t hate. It’s apathy.”

“The Sasara doll will not die. It will come back to life over and over.”

“It’s undead?! That’s straight out of a horror movie! But I just threw it away, so at least it won’t—”

“Oh, it hurts… Save me…”

There came a voice from the trash can.

“Eeeek! A voice! I heard it! It spoke! It spoke to us!!”

“Ah, it says one of three different messages when you hit it.”

“That scared me! Look, I’m sweating!”

“The other two lines are *I-it hurts…I am going to die…* and *Guh*.”

“That last one is a dying sound! Get out of here!”

“I will be on my way now.”

“Of course, well done.”

“Oh. And if I do fall in love with someone and find I cannot continue my job as your personal guard, then I will be sure to report to you on my

own accord," Sasara said, a slight incendiary tone to her voice.

"Good, I like that attitude. Do you have any candidates anyway?"

"That much I cannot say," she said, somewhat aggressively.

"Are you sure that's the right attitude for a guar—"

"This is a personal matter. I doubt there is any need for me to tell you anyway."

Their eyes met, and sparks of electricity ran between them.

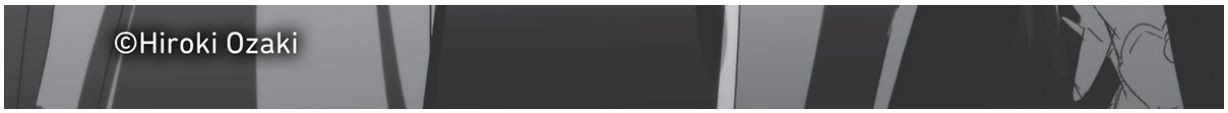
"I think I should be more afraid of you than anyone else, Sasara."

"Unlikely. You are the one I love most right now, Lady Ouka."

"I pray that you have no change of heart."

"I will be off." Sasara bowed politely and left the room.

Ouka sighed deeply. "I think I just gained myself a new enemy…"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AFTERWORD

Hello hello, this is Kisetsu Morita.

I think all who've read thus far are aware, but this was the Sasara book.

Maybe I shouldn't say so myself, but I was getting very attached to her as I was writing, and I started to really wonder if I should let her get married…

If you haven't yet read this volume, I am hopeful you might do so with great anticipation for how the story ends!

I portrayed much more of the landscape within the Empire (formerly Akinomiya) in this volume.

Most of the settings within the Empire sound kind of random, but there is a specific city (one in the Kansai region) that I've modeled it after.

So the setting is pretty much in order, at least when it comes to geography. Well, the mountain that appears in this volume is modeled after another city's vista in the Nagoya region, so I guess it isn't *exactly* the same as that one city.

When I write light novels, I usually make up place names while basing them on real cities, but when I write anything else I use real places. So of course, *Service* uses the latter. I hope you enjoyed that peek behind the scenes.

Now, I think most of you are already aware, but *Service* currently has two manga adaptations being serialized!

We have Toshiko Machida's *You Call That Service? Nico Plus* spin-off being serialized on Niconico Manga, and urute's comic version being serialized in Age Premium.

They're both so good, so please check them out! The spin-off also has an original character named Tamayori, so please don't miss it!

And now for our thanks, as usual. Hiroki Ozaki, thank you for the beautiful illustrations in this volume! Sasara is so cool and cute! I want to marry her!

Thank you as always to my editor, the designers, and the people in sales, and I hope to work with you in future volumes!

And thank you to all my readers for your support!

I'll see you in the next volume!

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